

When Community Ties Become Service: Modeling Social Capital as a Formative Higher-Order Construct in Community-Based Tourism

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Received: 31 March 2026. **Revision received:** 14 May 2026. **Accepted:** 20 May 2026

Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate how social capital shapes tourist satisfaction in community-based tourism (CBT), focusing on service quality as a key mechanism. Although prior research recognizes that social relationships matter for tourism development, less is known about how specific forms of social capital translate into visitor-level outcomes. To address this gap, we conceptualize social capital as a formative, higher-order construct comprising bonding, bridging, and linking dimensions, and integrate this structure with established frameworks for service quality and satisfaction. Data were collected from 375 domestic tourists across six CBT destinations in Vietnam. A sequential mixed-methods design was used to refine the research model and adapt measurement items to the local context. The hypotheses were tested using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), including the assessment of mediation effects. The findings show that social capital has a strong positive effect on service quality, and service quality, in turn, significantly increases tourist satisfaction. Service quality partially mediates the relationship between social capital and satisfaction, with the indirect pathway accounting for a substantial share of the total effect. Social capital also has a direct but weaker influence on satisfaction, suggesting that community relationships may additionally enhance visitors' experiences through more intangible channels. Overall, the model shows strong explanatory power and moderate predictive performance. The study contributes by advancing a higher-order view of social capital and clarifying service quality as the main link between community dynamics and tourist outcomes. The findings also suggest that CBT communities and policymakers should strengthen bonding, bridging, and linking social capital as relational infrastructure to improve service quality and tourist satisfaction.

Key Words: community-based tourism, social capital, service quality, tourist satisfaction, PLS-SEM, formative higher-order construct.

JEL Classification: Z33, M31, C83

Reference: Vu, H. G. (2026). When Community Ties Become Service: Modeling Social Capital as a Formative Higher-Order Construct in Community-Based Tourism. *Journal of Tourism and Services*, 17(32), 340-367. <https://doi.org/10.29036/d2tnwz17>

1. Introduction

Community-based tourism (CBT) is increasingly recognized as a viable pathway to sustainable tourism development, particularly in rural and peripheral regions where tourism can contribute to both economic improvement and social inclusion. By embedding tourism activities within local communities, CBT is expected to promote equitable benefit distribution, enhance local participation, and strengthen destination sustainability. However, despite its promise, the performance of CBT initiatives remains highly uneven across contexts, suggesting that underlying social and relational conditions play a critical role in shaping tourism outcomes.

In this regard, social capital has emerged as a key explanatory concept. Broadly conceptualized as networks, trust, and shared norms, social capital captures the relational structures that facilitate coordination and cooperation among individuals and groups. Although the concept has long-standing roots in sociological theory, it has gained increasing attention in tourism research since the 2010s (Kc et al., 2018). Importantly, its contribution extends beyond economic performance to include social cohesion, collective action, and community resilience - factors that are particularly central to the functioning of CBT systems (Pramanik et al., 2019; Prayitno et al., 2023).

A growing body of research suggests that social capital functions as an enabling mechanism that enhances tourism experiences and outcomes. In particular, trust reduces uncertainty and facilitates cooperation, social networks support coordination and information exchange, and shared norms help align expectations among stakeholders (Pramanik et al., 2019). These mechanisms are closely linked to service quality, which represents the primary interface between community capabilities and tourists' perceptions. When social capital is effectively mobilized, communities are more likely to deliver reliable, responsive, and authentic services, thereby enhancing tourist satisfaction and strengthening destination competitiveness. Recent CBT studies further show that tourists' satisfaction is strongly shaped by service-related factors, including responsiveness, assurance, empathy, tangible facilities, trust, cultural interaction, and local hospitality (Nguyen et al., 2024) while broader CBT research also links tourist satisfaction with sustainable tourism outcomes in community-managed destinations (Huruta, Sasongko, Wahyudi, Kawuryan, et al., 2024). These findings reinforce the need to examine service quality as a mechanism through which community-level social capital is translated into tourist-level evaluations. Empirical evidence further indicates that CBT contributes to rural livelihoods, with social capital acting as a catalyst for both community engagement and visitor satisfaction (Pramanik et al., 2019).

Despite this growing recognition, the role of social capital in tourism remains theoretically and empirically fragmented. A key source of ambiguity lies in its multidimensional nature. The literature consistently distinguishes between bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. Bonding social capital refers to strong ties within relatively homogeneous groups and supports trust, reciprocity, and social cohesion (Knollenberg et al., 2021), but may also constrain openness and innovation when overly dominant (Abdelmegeed Abdelwahed & Barkat, 2023). Bridging social capital connects individuals across social boundaries, enabling access to diverse knowledge, resources, and opportunities, and is often associated with innovation and development outcomes (Kc et al., 2018). Linking social capital captures vertical relationships with institutions and governance structures, facilitating access to external support, funding, and policy frameworks (Wu, 2021; Agovino & Marchesano, 2025).

Despite growing interest in social capital in tourism research, two gaps remain insufficiently addressed. First, although bonding, bridging, and linking social capital are theoretically distinct, previous studies have often examined them separately or treated social capital as a general construct. This limits understanding of how these dimensions jointly form the relational foundation of CBT systems. Second, existing research has tended to focus on the direct effects of social capital on community participation, perceived benefits, or development outcomes, while paying less attention to the mechanisms through which social capital translates into tourist-level outcomes. In particular, service quality remains underexamined as a mediating pathway linking community-level relational resources with tourist satisfaction.

To address these gaps, this study aims to examine how social capital influences tourist satisfaction in CBT destinations in Vietnam and to assess the mediating role of service quality in this relationship. Social capital is conceptualized as a formative higher-order construct composed of bonding, bridging, and linking dimensions. Accordingly, the study asks: How does social capital influence tourist satisfaction in CBT, and to what extent is this relationship mediated by service quality? Addressing this question, the study develops and tests a structural model in which social capital influences tourist satisfaction both directly and indirectly through service quality. Specifically, social capital is expected to enhance service quality, thereby improving tourist satisfaction. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding

of both the structural and process-based roles of social capital in CBT systems. Using survey data collected from 375 domestic tourists at six community-based tourism destinations in Vietnam, this study applies partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4 to test the proposed model.

This study makes several contributions. First, it advances the conceptualization of social capital by modeling it as a formative higher-order construct, thereby addressing the conceptual ambiguity associated with treating its dimensions separately. Second, it extends the application of social capital theory in tourism by linking it to service quality and tourist satisfaction, moving beyond the traditional focus on participation and development outcomes. Third, it provides a mechanism-based explanation of how community-level relational structures translate into individual-level tourism experiences in CBT settings in Vietnam, highlighting the mediating role of service quality.

Through these contributions, the study offers a more integrated and theoretically grounded understanding of the role of social capital in CBT, with implications for improving service coordination and tourist satisfaction in sustainable CBT development.

2. Literature review

2.1 Social capital

Social capital has become a widely used concept in tourism research, as it helps explain how social relationships shape development outcomes and visitor experiences. In the context of community-based tourism (CBT), social capital is commonly conceptualized through three distinct dimensions: bonding, bridging, and linking social capital (Woolcock, 2001; Aminudin & Jamal, 2024; Prayitno et al., 2024). These dimensions should not be treated as interchangeable indicators of a single underlying construct. Rather, they represent structurally different forms of relationships, each contributing uniquely to tourism processes and outcomes. Empirical evidence from CBT studies supports this perspective, demonstrating that bonding, bridging, and linking social capital play differentiated roles in shaping community participation, resilience, and tourism performance (McGehee et al., 2010; Knollenberg et al., 2021; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011, Witchayakawin et al., 2024). For instance, bonding ties strengthen internal cohesion, bridging ties facilitate access to external knowledge and resources, while linking ties connect communities with institutions and governance structures. Building on this perspective, a growing body of research conceptualizes social capital as a formative composite construct, where bonding, bridging, and linking jointly form the overall level of social capital (SoCap), rather than reflect it. This approach is particularly appropriate in tourism contexts, where different types of social relationships often perform complementary rather than redundant functions.

The literature consistently shows that each dimension of social capital supports tourism development through a different pathway. Bonding social capital reflects strong ties within relatively homogeneous groups. It is central to building trust, reciprocity, and social cohesion, which can strengthen inclusivity and encourage collective action in rural and community-based tourism (CBT) contexts (Putnam, 2000; McGehee et al., 2010; Knollenberg et al., 2021, Silva Dos Santos et al., 2025). At the same time, very strong bonding can produce “closed” networks, making communities less receptive to external ideas and potentially slowing innovation. In contrast, bridging social capital connects people and groups across social boundaries. These ties broaden access to diverse information, external knowledge, and resources, and they are often linked to tourism development, innovation, and entrepreneurial activity (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011; Knollenberg et al., 2021, Aminudin & Jamal, 2024, Wang et al., 2025). Besides, Linking social capital refers to vertical relationships between communities and institutions. Such connections help communities engage with governance systems and secure financial resources and policy support, which is especially important when coordination is required beyond the local level - for example,

in destination management and institutional development (Woolcock, 2001; Partelow, 2021; Munir, 2025, Luc et al., 2026). Importantly, these dimensions are typically complementary rather than interchangeable. In other words, tourism outcomes are shaped less by any single type of tie than by the overall configuration of bonding, bridging, and linking relationships (Woolcock, 2001; Prayitno et al., 2024).

Empirical CBT research further suggests that social capital affects tourism outcomes through several recurring mechanisms, particularly trust, social networks, and shared norms. Trust reduces uncertainty and supports cooperation among stakeholders; networks facilitate coordination and information exchange; and shared norms help align expectations among community members and visitors (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011; Fyall et al., 2012; Silva Dos Santos et al., 2025). These mechanisms are best understood as outcomes of how bonding, bridging, and linking ties interact. From this perspective, social capital functions as a form of relational infrastructure that strengthens both interaction quality and coordination effectiveness within tourism systems.

2.2 Social capital and service quality in community-based tourism

Although CBT research does not always model service quality directly, several studies provide clear indirect support for a link between social capital and service delivery. For example, strong trust and cooperation within the community can improve coordination and reliability in tourism activities; Prayitno et al., 2024). Network connections facilitate information sharing, which supports responsiveness among stakeholders (Kc et al., 2018; Aminudin & Jamal, 2024). Linking social capital, through institutional relationships, can contribute to better infrastructure and stronger external support - both of which matter for service provision (Wu, 2021; Munir, 2025; Luc et al., 2026).

From a service management perspective, these elements - trust, coordination, and responsiveness - are widely recognized as important antecedents of service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Grönroos, 2007). In tourism, service quality is commonly framed as customers' evaluations of service performance across dimensions such as reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Gallardo & Rojas, 2024).

Therefore, even when not explicitly stated in CBT studies, the accumulated evidence supports the argument that social capital strengthens the interaction quality and coordination capacity that underpin service quality in tourism contexts.

H1: Social capital positively influences service quality.

2.3 Service quality and tourist satisfaction in community-based tourism

Tourist satisfaction is widely regarded as a key outcome in tourism research, as it reflects the extent to which travel experiences meet or exceed expectations (Oliver, 1980; Gallardo & Rojas, 2024). When service delivery aligns with or surpasses tourists' expectations, higher levels of satisfaction are typically observed. A substantial body of empirical research confirms that perceived service quality is a primary determinant of satisfaction and is positively associated with favorable behavioral outcomes such as revisit intention and recommendation (Chen & Chen, 2010; Prayag et al., 2017; Gallardo & Rojas, 2024; Alqraini & Alasim, 2026).

In the context of community-based tourism (CBT), service quality is closely linked to experiential elements such as authenticity, interaction quality, and community engagement, which shape visitors' perceptions in meaningful ways (Fyall et al., 2012; Knollenberg et al., 2021; Huruta et al., 2024; Oltean et al., 2025). These dimensions extend beyond functional service performance to include the quality of social interactions and the authenticity of local experiences.

When services are delivered reliably, responsively, and with genuine local engagement, tourists are more likely to form positive evaluations of their experiences. Therefore, service quality is expected to play a central role in shaping tourist satisfaction in CBT contexts.

H2: Service quality positively influences tourist satisfaction.

2.4 Mediating role of service quality

While social capital shapes the structural and relational conditions under which tourism activities are organized and delivered, its influence on tourist outcomes is unlikely to be purely direct. Rather, social capital operates through intermediate mechanisms that affect how tourism services are coordinated, experienced, and evaluated. In this regard, prior research emphasizes that trust, networks, and shared norms - core components of social capital - primarily influence outcomes by facilitating interaction quality and collective service provision (Woolcock, 2001; McGehee et al., 2010; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011; Prayitno et al., 2024).

From a service perspective, these relational mechanisms are closely aligned with the underlying drivers of service quality, such as coordination, responsiveness, and reliability (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Grönroos, 2007). Service quality, in turn, represents a key evaluative outcome of service delivery processes, reflecting the extent to which services meet or exceed customer expectations (Oliver, 1980; Chen & Chen, 2010; Gallardo & Rojas, 2024).

In the context of community-based tourism (CBT), where service provision is inherently collective and socially embedded, improvements in social capital are expected to enhance coordination capacity and interaction quality among stakeholders. These improvements are then translated into better perceived service quality, which subsequently shapes tourists' satisfaction. Therefore, service quality is not merely an outcome but a key mechanism through which social capital influences tourist evaluations.

H3: Service quality mediates the relationship between social capital and tourist satisfaction.

2.5 Direct effect of social capital on tourist satisfaction

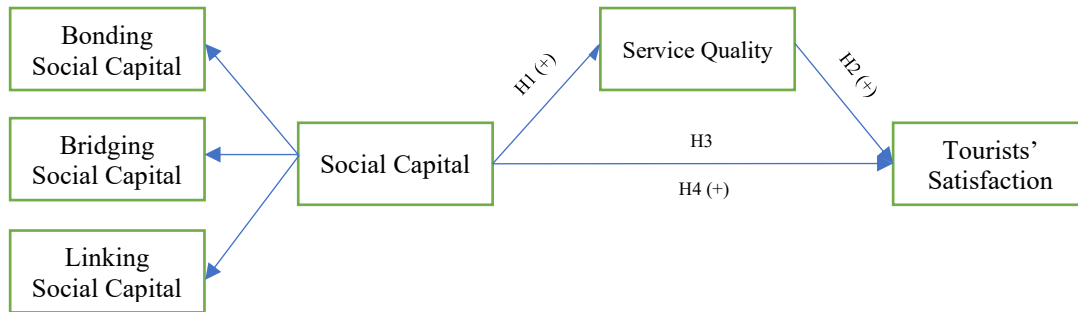
Beyond its indirect influence through service quality, social capital may also exert a direct effect on tourist satisfaction. In community-based tourism (CBT) contexts, tourist experiences are inherently social and relational, extending beyond purely functional evaluations of service performance. Tourism experiences are co-created through interactions between visitors and local communities, and these interactions can significantly shape tourists' emotional responses and overall evaluations (Cohen, 1988; Richards & Hall, 2000; Oltean et al., 2025).

From a social capital perspective, bonding, bridging, and linking ties contribute differently to the relational environment experienced by tourists. Bonding social capital fosters trust, familiarity, and a sense of hospitality within the host community (Putnam, 2000; Prayitno et al., 2024; Silva Dos Santos et al., 2025). Bridging social capital enables interactions across social and cultural boundaries, enriching tourists' experiences through diversity and learning (Woolcock, 2001; Aminudin & Jamal, 2024). Linking social capital, in turn, enhances tourists' confidence in local governance, institutional support, and destination management (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004; Munir, 2025; Luc et al., 2026).

These relational dimensions contribute to a welcoming and trustworthy social environment, which can reduce perceived uncertainty and enhance perceived authenticity - two key determinants of tourist satisfaction in experiential tourism contexts (Chen & Chen, 2010; Gursoy et al., 2019; Gallardo & Rojas, 2024). As a result, tourists may derive satisfaction directly from the quality of social interactions and the broader relational atmosphere of the destination, independently of service performance evaluations.

H4: Social capital positively influences tourist satisfaction.

Figure 1. Proposed research model



Source: Developed by the author

3. Methods

This study employed a sequential mixed-methods design to strengthen both conceptual clarity and empirical rigor. Data collection took place in February 2026 across six community-based tourism (CBT) initiatives in Vietnam. The sites were selected using purposive, theory-driven sampling to maximize variation in contextual factors that are likely to shape social capital and tourism outcomes. Specifically, the sample captured diversity in geographical settings (mountainous, coastal, and delta areas), stages of tourism development (from established destinations to emerging initiatives), and modes of community participation (ranging from community-led to institution-supported models). This strategy supports a more nuanced understanding of how different configurations of social capital function across contexts, thereby supporting a more context-sensitive interpretation of the findings and strengthening the analytical relevance of the study.

The research was implemented in two sequential phases. In Phase 1, qualitative procedures were used to develop and refine the conceptual framework. First, a desk-based literature review identified key constructs and theorized relationships among social capital, service quality, and tourist satisfaction. Next, expert interviews with tourism and community development scholars and practitioners were conducted to validate the proposed model and ensure contextual relevance. A pilot test was then conducted with 30 domestic tourists who had prior experience with CBT services in Vietnam. Participants varied in age, gender, and travel experience. They were asked to complete the questionnaire and provide feedback on item clarity, wording, logical flow, and contextual appropriateness. Based on their comments, several items were reworded for clarity, minor terminology issues were corrected, and the order of questions was refined. No major changes were made to the underlying constructs, as the pilot results indicated that the items were generally understandable and appropriate for the CBT setting. The final set of constructs and measurement items is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Table of constructs

Factor	Definition	Code	Item
Bonding Social Capital	Close-knit social relationships characterized by trust, support, and a sense of belonging in direct interactions	BOND1	I feel that the local residents I interact with directly are willing to help when I need it.
		BOND2	I can rely on local residents or hosts when unexpected problems occur.
		BOND3	Local residents at the destination tend to support each other when serving tourists.

	with local residents (Putnam, 2000; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004)	BOND4	My interactions with local residents make me feel a sense of closeness and trust.
		BOND5	I feel welcomed by local residents as if I were a familiar guest.
Bridging Social Capital	Open and cooperative social relationships across different groups of local residents, as perceived by tourists through openness, information sharing, and inter-group coordination in tourism service provision (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001).	BRID1	The local community at the destination is open and friendly toward tourists.
		BRID2	I have opportunities to interact with different groups of local residents during my trip.
		BRID3	I learn new information or experiences through interactions with local residents.
		BRID4	The tourism information I receive from different local residents is consistent and useful.
		BRID5	I find it easy to integrate into the social environment of the local community.
		BRID6	Different groups of local residents closely coordinate in serving tourists.
		BRID7	Tourism services are delivered through collaboration among different local groups.
Linking Social Capital	Vertical relationships between individuals and local institutions, reflecting trust in and access to formal support structures (Woolcock, 2001; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004).	LINK1	Local management authorities or government effectively support tourists.
		LINK2	I receive useful responses when contacting official local support channels.
		LINK3	I feel reassured by the presence of local authorities at the destination.
		LINK4	I trust the way tourism is managed and governed locally.
		LINK5	Official information about tourism services and regulations is clearly communicated.
Service Quality	Tourists' overall evaluation of service quality at the destination, reflected through the five SERVQUAL dimensions: Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1988; 1991).	SQ1	The physical facilities and environment at the destination are well maintained and visually appealing.
		SQ2	Tourism services are delivered consistently and as promised throughout my visit.
		SQ3	Local service providers respond promptly and effectively to my needs.
		SQ4	I feel confident and safe when using tourism services at this destination.
		SQ5	Local service providers show genuine care and attention to my individual needs.
Tourist Satisfaction	Tourists' overall evaluative judgment of their experience at the destination, reflected in their overall satisfaction and the extent to	SAT1	I am satisfied with my overall experience at this destination.
		SAT2	The experience meets my initial expectations.
		SAT3	The experience is better than I expected.

	<p>which the experience meets or exceeds their initial expectations (Oliver, 1997).</p>		
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Source: Developed by the author

In Phase 2, a quantitative survey was administered to test the study hypotheses. Data were collected from domestic tourists who had experienced CBT services at the selected sites. A convenience sampling approach was employed, whereby respondents were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate at the time of data collection. This approach is considered appropriate in tourism research, particularly in field settings where access to respondents is constrained and the target population is difficult to define precisely.

Using a combination of on-site and online distribution, the study obtained 375 valid responses. The questionnaire included Likert-type measures of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital, as well as service quality and tourist satisfaction, adapted and developed from established scales.

Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS4. This approach was considered appropriate for the present study for three reasons. First, the study aims to explain and predict tourist satisfaction in CBT rather than to confirm a fully established covariance-based theory. PLS-SEM is suitable for prediction-oriented research and for explaining variance in key endogenous constructs (Hair et al., 2021; Hair et al., 2022; Sarstedt et al., 2014). Consistent with this prediction-oriented rationale, the model’s predictive relevance and out-of-sample predictive performance were further evaluated using PLSpredict. This procedure compares the prediction errors of the PLS-SEM model with those of a linear model benchmark using RMSE and MAE indicators, following recent guidelines for predictive model assessment in PLS-SEM (Shmueli et al., 2016; Shmueli et al., 2019). Second, the model includes social capital as a formative higher-order construct composed of three theoretically distinct but complementary lower-order dimensions: bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. These dimensions are conceptualized as forming the overall configuration of social capital in CBT, rather than as interchangeable reflective indicators. Therefore, PLS-SEM is appropriate because it can accommodate formative measurement models and hierarchical component models. Following the two-stage approach, the latent variable scores of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital were used to estimate the formative higher-order construct of social capital in the second-stage model (Becker et al., 2012; Sarstedt et al., 2019). Third, the study examines both direct and indirect relationships, particularly the mediating role of service quality in the relationship between social capital and tourist satisfaction. PLS-SEM is suitable for this purpose because it allows the simultaneous assessment of the measurement model and the structural model, including indicator reliability, construct reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity, formative indicator collinearity, outer weights, path coefficients, and bootstrapped direct and indirect effects (Hair et al., 2021; Hair et al., 2022).

The analysis proceeded in two stages. First, the measurement model was assessed to ensure the reliability and validity of the constructs before hypothesis testing. For reflective constructs, indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity were examined. For the formative higher-order construct of social capital, collinearity, outer weights, and the significance and relevance of the formative dimensions were assessed. This step was necessary to confirm that the constructs were measured appropriately before evaluating the hypothesized relationships.

Second, the structural model was assessed to test the proposed hypotheses. The direct hypotheses were examined using standardized path coefficients, t-values, p-values, and bootstrapped confidence intervals. The strength of each relationship was further evaluated through effect sizes. The mediating hypothesis was tested by estimating the indirect effect of social capital on tourist satisfaction through service quality using bootstrapping. Mediation was interpreted based on the significance and confidence

interval of the indirect effect, together with the remaining direct effect between social capital and tourist satisfaction. In addition, the model's explanatory and predictive performance was assessed using R^2 , adjusted R^2 , and predictive relevance indicators. This procedure allowed the study to evaluate not only whether the hypothesized relationships were statistically supported, but also the strength, precision, and predictive value of the proposed model.

4. Results

4.1 Research context

Vietnam was selected as the research context because it represents a relevant developing-country setting in which CBT has been increasingly promoted as a pathway for rural development, community participation, and sustainable tourism. In such contexts, tourism outcomes depend not only on physical resources or market access, but also on the quality of social relationships, local cooperation, institutional support, and service delivery capacity. Therefore, Vietnam provides an appropriate setting for examining how social capital shapes service quality and tourist satisfaction in CBT.

The empirical analysis was conducted across six CBT sites in Vietnam, namely Sa Pa, Mai Chau, Phong Nha – Ke Bang National Park, Cu Lao Cham, Con Son, and Tan Trieu. These sites were purposively selected to capture substantial variation in geographical settings, levels of tourism development, and forms of community participation. Specifically, the selected destinations represent three major geographical contexts, including mountainous regions (Sa Pa and Mai Chau), coastal and island environments (Phong Nha–Ke Bang and Cu Lao Cham), and delta and peri-urban areas (Con Son and Tan Trieu). In terms of development levels, the sample includes both well-established CBT destinations with high tourist flows (e.g., Sa Pa and Mai Chau) and emerging or transitioning initiatives (Con Son and Tan Trieu). Furthermore, the selected sites exhibit diverse forms of community participation, ranging from community-led models with strong local engagement to more institution-supported or hybrid governance structures.

This diversity provides a robust empirical setting to examine how different configurations of social capital operate across contexts and influence service quality and tourist satisfaction.

Table 2. Characteristics of selected community-based tourism sites

Site	Geographical Setting	Level of Tourism Development	Form of Community Participation
Sa Pa (Lao Cai Province)	Mountainous area	Highly developed	High participation, with increasing commercialization
Mai Chau (Phu Tho Province)	Mountain valley	Stable development	Very high, community-led participation
Phong Nha – Ke Bang National Park (Quang Binh Province)	Forest and karst landscape	Rapidly developing	Moderate participation
Cu Lao Cham (Quang Nam Province)	Coastal island	Moderately developed	High participation with sustainability orientation
Con Son (Can Tho Province)	Mekong Delta (river island)	Emerging	Very high, community-based participation
Tan Trieu (Dong Nai Province)	Peri-urban agricultural area	Early-stage development	Moderate, institution-supported participation

Source: Developed by the author

4.2 Sample characteristic

The sample consists of 375 tourists, reflecting a diverse distribution across age, gender, education, and income levels.

In terms of age, respondents are relatively evenly distributed across different groups, with the largest proportion belonging to the 30–39 age group (21.07%), followed by those aged 20–29 (19.73%) and 40–49 (16.53%). Younger respondents aged 18–20 and those aged 50–59 each account for 15.47%, while respondents aged 60 and above represent 11.73%. This distribution suggests that the sample captures a broad range of age groups, enhancing the representativeness of the study.

Regarding gender, female respondents constitute a slight majority (52.53%), compared to 45.33% male respondents, while 2.13% of participants preferred not to disclose their gender. This relatively balanced gender distribution helps mitigate potential bias in the analysis.

In terms of education level, the majority of respondents hold a bachelor's degree (69.87%), followed by those with high school education or below (15.73%). A smaller proportion have postgraduate qualifications, including master's degrees (9.60%) and doctoral degrees (4.80%). This indicates that the sample is relatively well-educated, which is consistent with typical profiles of tourists participating in survey-based research.

With respect to income, the largest group of respondents falls within the 20 to below 30 million VND range (33.33%), followed by those earning between 10 and below 20 million VND (28.27%). Respondents earning under 10 million VND account for 13.87%, while those in higher income brackets - 30 million VND and above - collectively represent 24.53% of the sample. This distribution reflects a relatively diverse range of income levels, suggesting variation in purchasing power among respondents.

Overall, the demographic profile indicates a heterogeneous sample, which provides a broad empirical basis for examining tourist satisfaction in community-based tourism destinations in Vietnam. However, given the sampling design, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific rather than statistically generalizable to all CBT destinations.

Table 3 presents the demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 3. Characteristics of research respondents

Variables	Responses	Frequency	Percent
<i>Age</i>			
18 – 20 years	58	15,47%	15,47%
20 – 29 years	74	19,73%	35,20%
30 – 39 years	79	21,07%	56,27%
40 – 49 years	62	16,53%	72,80%
50 – 59 years	58	15,47%	88,27%
60 years and older	44	11,73%	100,00%
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	170	45,33%	45,33%
Female	197	52,53%	97,87%
Prefer not to disclose	8	2,13%	100,00%
<i>Education level</i>			
Highschool or below	59	15,73%	15,73%
Bachelor's Degree	262	69,87%	85,60%
Master's Degree	36	9,60%	95,20%
Doctorate Degree (PhD)	18	4,80%	100,00%
<i>Annual Income</i>			

Under 10 million VND	52	13,87%	13,87%
10 million to below 20 million VND	106	28,27%	42,13%
20 million to below 30 million VND	125	33,33%	75,47%
30 million to below 40 million VND	62	16,53%	92,00%
40 million to below 50 million VND	30	8,00%	100,00%
<i>Note: 1 VND = 0,000038 USD at 9:46 March 29th 2026</i>			

Source: Developed by the author

4.3 Measurement model assessment

4.3.1 Lower-order components

Outer loadings

Table 4. Indicator loadings (final measurement model assessment)

	BOND	BRID	LINK	SAT	SQ
BOND2	0.916				
BOND3	0.916				
BOND4	0.914				
BOND5	0.906				
BRID1		0.851			
BRID2		0.863			
BRID3		0.873			
BRID4		0.843			
BRID5		0.881			
BRID6		0.885			
BRID7		0.870			
LINK1			0.894		
LINK2			0.894		
LINK3			0.903		
LINK4			0.900		
LINK5			0.895		
SAT1				0.934	
SAT2				0.938	
SAT3				0.905	
SQ1					0.920
SQ2					0.947
SQ3					0.936
SQ4					0.941
SQ5					0.897

Source: Developed by the author

The reliability of the reflective measurement model was assessed using indicator loadings. In the initial assessment, BOND1 showed an outer loading of 0.691, which was slightly below the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2021). Therefore, BOND1 was removed to improve indicator reliability, and the measurement model was re-estimated. After this adjustment, all retained indicators showed outer loadings ranging from 0.843 to 0.947, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 and confirming

adequate indicator reliability. The loading patterns are theoretically consistent: bonding social capital (BOND) shows highly homogeneous and strong loadings, reflecting cohesive internal ties; bridging social capital (BRID) exhibits greater variation, capturing diverse cross-group interactions; and linking social capital (LINK) demonstrates stable and high loadings, indicating well-defined institutional relationships. Service quality (SQ) and tourist satisfaction (SAT) also present consistently high loadings, supporting the robustness of established measurement scales (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Although some loadings exceed 0.90, suggesting potential redundancy, this is acceptable given the conceptual coherence of the constructs. Overall, the results provide sufficient evidence of indicator reliability and support the adequacy of the measurement model for subsequent analysis.

Construct reliability and validity

Table 5. Construct reliability and validity assessment

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
BOND	0.933	0.934	0.952	0.833
BRID	0.945	0.945	0.955	0.751
LINK	0.939	0.940	0.954	0.805
SAT	0.916	0.917	0.947	0.857
SQ	0.960	0.960	0.969	0.862

Source: Developed by the author

Construct reliability and convergent validity were assessed using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (ρ_a , ρ_c), and average variance extracted (AVE), following the guidelines of (Parasuraman et al., 1988). The results showed in Table 5 indicate that all constructs demonstrate excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.933 to 0.960 and composite reliability (ρ_c) values between 0.952 and 0.969, all exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. Convergent validity is also strongly supported, as AVE values range from 0.751 to 0.862, well above the minimum requirement of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Overall, the results confirm that the measurement model achieves high reliability and satisfactory convergent validity, supporting its suitability for further structural analysis.

Discriminant validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the HTMT ratio, the Fornell–Larcker criterion, and cross-loadings, following the recommendations of Henseler et al. (2015) and Fornell & Larcker (1981). The HTMT values range from 0.806 to 0.907, with most values below the conservative threshold of 0.85 and all remaining below the more liberal threshold of 0.90–0.95, indicating acceptable discriminant validity despite the conceptual proximity among constructs. Notably, the HTMT value between BRID and LINK (0.907) and between SQ and SAT (0.906) slightly exceeds the stricter cutoff but remains acceptable given the theoretical relatedness of these constructs. The Fornell–Larcker criterion further supports discriminant validity, as the square root of AVE for each construct (0.867–0.928) exceeds its inter-construct correlations. In addition, cross-loading analysis shows that all indicators load highest on their intended constructs compared to others, confirming indicator-level discriminant validity. Overall, the results provide sufficient evidence that the constructs are empirically distinct, while still capturing theoretically related dimensions within the model.

4.3.2 Higher-order components

In this study, Social Capital was modeled as a higher-order construct composed of three lower-order components: bonding social capital, bridging social capital, and linking social capital. This specification is theoretically grounded in the social capital literature, which distinguishes bonding, bridging, and linking ties as complementary dimensions of social capital (Putnam, 2000; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004; Woolcock, 2001). Following the two-stage approach for estimating higher-order constructs in PLS-SEM, the latent variable scores of the lower-order components were used to estimate the higher-order construct in the second-stage model (Becker et al., 2012; Sarstedt et al., 2019). Since Social Capital was specified as a formative higher-order construct, it was assessed using formative measurement criteria, including collinearity diagnostics, outer weights, bootstrapped significance levels, and confidence intervals (Hair et al., 2021; Hair et al., 2022; Sarstedt et al., 2019). In addition, the reflective constructs retained in the second-stage model, namely Service Quality and Tourist Satisfaction, were assessed using reflective measurement criteria, including indicator loadings, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2021; Hair et al., 2022; Henseler et al., 2015).

4.3.2.1. Reflective measurement assessment of Service Quality and Tourist Satisfaction in the second-stage model

Outer loadings

The reflective constructs in the second-stage model were first assessed using outer loadings, construct reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Since SoCap was modeled as a formative higher-order construct, outer loadings were evaluated only for the reflective lower-order constructs, namely Service Quality (SQ) and Tourist Satisfaction (SAT). As shown in Table 6, all retained indicators demonstrated strong outer loadings, ranging from 0.897 to 0.947. These values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating adequate indicator reliability (Hair et al., 2021; Hair et al., 2022).

Table 6. Outer loadings of reflective constructs in the second-stage model

Items	SAT	SQ
SQ1		0.920
SQ2		0.947
SQ3		0.936
SQ4		0.941
SQ5		0.897
SAT1	0.934	
SAT2	0.938	
SAT3	0.905	

Source: Developed by the author

Construct reliability and validity

Construct reliability and convergent validity were assessed using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (ρ_a and ρ_c), and average variance extracted (AVE). As presented in Table 7, both Service Quality and Tourist Satisfaction showed high levels of internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values were above the recommended threshold of 0.70, while AVE values exceeded

the minimum threshold of 0.50. These results indicate satisfactory construct reliability and convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2021; Hair et al., 2022).

Table 7. **Construct reliability and convergent validity of reflective constructs in the second-stage model**

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
SAT	0.916	0.917	0.947	0.857
SQ	0.960	0.960	0.969	0.862

Source: Developed by the author

The results in Table 7 indicate that both SQ and SAT exhibit very high internal consistency, with composite reliability exceeding 0.96 and AVE exceeding 0.85. These values not only meet but substantially exceed the recommended thresholds, indicating strong construct reliability and convergent validity.

Discriminant validity

Discriminant validity was evaluated using the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT), the Fornell–Larcker criterion, and cross-loadings. The HTMT value between SQ and SAT is 0.906, which is slightly above the conservative threshold of 0.85 but remains below the more lenient threshold of 0.90–0.95 suggested by (Henseler et al., 2015). Given the conceptual proximity between service quality and satisfaction, this value is considered acceptable. The Fornell–Larcker criterion further confirms discriminant validity, as the square root of AVE for each construct exceeds its correlations with other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In addition, cross-loading analysis indicates that all indicators load higher on their respective constructs than on others. Taken together, these results provide acceptable evidence of discriminant validity for the reflective constructs in the second-stage model (please see Table 8).

Table 8. **Discriminant validity assessment of reflective constructs in the second-stage model**

Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)			
	SAT	SQ	
SAT			
SQ	0.906		
Fornell & Larcker criterion			
	SAT	SQ	
SAT	0.926		
SQ	0.860	0.928	
Crossloadings			
	SAT	SQ	SoCap
SAT1	0.934	0.797	0.755
SAT2	0.938	0.808	0.726
SAT3	0.905	0.783	0.716
SQ1	0.803	0.920	0.803
SQ2	0.804	0.947	0.788
SQ3	0.797	0.936	0.786

SQ4	0.816	0.941	0.799
SQ5	0.770	0.897	0.762

Source: Developed by the author.

4.3.2.2. Formative assessment of the higher-order construct of Social Capital in the second-stage model

Since Social Capital was modeled as a formative higher-order construct, it was assessed based on collinearity diagnostics, the size and significance of outer weights, and bootstrap confidence intervals, following PLS-SEM guidelines (Hair et al., 2021, 2022).

Collinearity among the formative lower-order components was assessed using the variance inflation factor. As shown in Table 9, the VIF values ranged from 2.895 to 4.343. Although the VIF values for Bridging Social Capital and Linking Social Capital exceeded the more conservative threshold of 3, all values remained below the commonly accepted threshold of 5. Therefore, collinearity was not considered a critical concern for the formative higher-order construct.

The significance and relevance of the formative components were evaluated using bootstrapped outer weights. The results showed that all three lower-order components had positive and statistically significant outer weights. Bonding Social Capital had an outer weight of 0.405, with a t-value of 5.912 and $p < 0.001$. Bridging Social Capital had an outer weight of 0.243, with a t-value of 3.307 and $p = 0.001$. Linking Social Capital had the strongest relative contribution, with an outer weight of 0.424, a t-value of 5.857, and $p < 0.001$. In addition, the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for all three components did not include zero, further supporting their statistical significance and relevance.

These findings indicate that bonding, bridging, and linking social capital are all significant and relevant components of the formative higher-order construct of Social Capital. Among the three components, Linking Social Capital showed the strongest relative contribution, followed by Bonding Social Capital and Bridging Social Capital. Overall, the results support the appropriateness of specifying Social Capital as a formative higher-order construct.

Table 9. Formative assessment of the higher-order construct of Social Capital

Higher-order construct	Lower-order component	Outer weight	t-value	p-value	95% BC CI	VIF	Decision
Social Capital	Bonding Social Capital	0.405	5.912	<0.001	[0.278; 0.542]	2.895	Retained
	Bridging Social Capital	0.243	3.307	0.001	[0.097; 0.380]	4.343	Retained
	Linking Social Capital	0.424	5.857	<0.001	[0.288; 0.574]	4.186	Retained

Source: Developed by the author.

4.4 Structural model assessment

4.4.1 Collinearity assessment

Table 10. Collinearity assessment (Variance Inflation Factor – VIF)

	SAT	SQ	SoCap
SAT			
SQ	3.576		

SoCap	3.576	1.000	
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Source: Developed by the author.

Collinearity was assessed using variance inflation factor (VIF) values. Table 10 shows that all VIF values are below the threshold of 5, as recommended by (J. Hair et al., 2021), indicating that multicollinearity is not a concern in the structural model.

4.4.2 Direct hypothesis testing

The structural relationships were evaluated using bootstrapping with bias-corrected confidence intervals. All hypothesized paths are positive and statistically significant at $p < 0.001$.

Social capital has a strong positive effect on service quality ($\beta = 0.849$), suggesting that higher levels of social capital substantially enhance perceived service quality. Service quality, in turn, has a significant positive effect on tourist satisfaction ($\beta = 0.673$), indicating that service quality plays a central role in shaping tourist evaluations.

In addition, social capital exerts a direct positive effect on tourist satisfaction ($\beta = 0.220$), although this effect is considerably weaker than its indirect influence through service quality.

Moreover, the bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals further confirm the significance of the direct effects. The confidence intervals for H1 [0.786, 0.890], H2 [0.556, 0.782], and H4 [0.123, 0.332] are all positive and do not include zero. Therefore, the results provide additional support for H1, H2, and H4. The results also suggest that the strongest direct effect is observed from social capital to service quality, whereas the direct effect of social capital on tourist satisfaction is positive but comparatively weaker.

Table 11. Results of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Confidence intervals bias corrected		Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics	P values	Result of Hypothesis Testing
			2.5%	97.5%				
H1. Social Capital → Service Quality	0.849	0.848	0.786	0.890	0.026	32.529	0.000	Supported
H2. Service Quality → Tourist Satisfaction	0.673	0.667	0.556	0.782	0.058	11.586	0.000	Supported
H4. Social Capital → Tourist Satisfaction	0.220	0.226	0.123	0.332	0.054	4.040	0.000	Supported

Source: Developed by the author.

4.4.3 Mediation analysis

The mediating role of service quality was examined using bootstrapping procedures. H3 specifically refers to the indirect effect of social capital on tourist satisfaction through service quality. As shown in Table 12, the indirect effect of social capital on tourist satisfaction via service quality is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.571$, $t = 11.273$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H3. The direct paths are also reported to support the interpretation of the mediation result. In particular, the effect of service quality on tourist satisfaction is significant ($\beta = 0.673$, $t = 11.586$, $p < 0.001$), and the remaining direct effect of social capital on tourist satisfaction also remains significant ($\beta = 0.220$, $t = 4.040$, $p < 0.001$). Since both the indirect effect and the remaining direct effect are significant, service quality is interpreted as partially mediating the relationship between social capital and tourist satisfaction.

Table 12. Results of mediation testing

Hypothesis	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Confidence intervals bias corrected		Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics	P values	Result of Hypothesis Testing
			2.5%	97.5%				
H3. Social Capital → Service Quality → Tourist Satisfaction	0.571	0.565	0.476	0.677	0.051	11.273	0.000	Supported
	0.673	0.667	0.556	0.782	0.058	11.586	0.000	
	0.220	0.226	0.123	0.332	0.054	4.040	0.000	

Source: Developed by the author.

To further assess the strength of the mediation, the variance accounted for (VAF) was calculated. The indirect effect of social capital on tourist satisfaction through service quality was 0.571, while the total effect of social capital on tourist satisfaction is 0.791, resulting in a VAF of 72.2%. According to Hair et al. (2021), VAF values between 20% and 80% indicate partial mediation. Since both the indirect effect and the remaining direct effect were significant, the mediation was interpreted as partial mediation.

This finding highlights that the influence of social capital is primarily transmitted through service-related mechanisms rather than direct effects alone.

4.4.4 Explanatory power

Table 13. Explanatory power of the structural model

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values

SAT	0.752	0.751	0.037	20.252	0.000
SERVQUAL	0.720	0.719	0.044	16.330	0.000

Source: Developed by author.

The explanatory power of the structural model was assessed using adjusted R² values. The results show that the model explains 75.2% of the variance in tourist satisfaction and 72.0% of the variance in service quality. These values indicate substantial explanatory power for both endogenous constructs.

4.4.5 Effect sizes

Table 14. Effect size results (f²)

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
SERVQUAL -> SAT	0.513	0.518	0.146	3.506	0.000
SoCap -> SAT	0.055	0.059	0.025	2.178	0.029
SoCap -> SERVQUAL	2.576	2.661	0.579	4.448	0.000

Source: Developed by the author.

Effect sizes were assessed using f² to examine the relative contribution of each structural relationship. The results indicate that social capital has a substantial effect on service quality (f² = 2.576), while service quality shows a large effect on tourist satisfaction (f² = 0.513). In contrast, the direct effect of social capital on tourist satisfaction is relatively small (f² = 0.055). These findings suggest that, within the present sample, social capital appears to contribute to tourist satisfaction primarily through its association with service quality rather than through a strong direct effect. Therefore, the results should be interpreted as supporting the mediating role of service quality, while avoiding overly strong causal claims.

4.4.6 Assessment of predictive relevance and prediction errors

Table 15. Assessment of predictive relevance and prediction errors

	Q ² predict	PLS-SEM_RMSE	PLS-SEM_MAE	LM_RMSE	LM_MAE
ASSU	0.631	0.435	0.324	0.432	0.324
EMPA	0.573	0.513	0.352	0.437	0.325
RELI	0.614	0.458	0.336	0.459	0.340
RESP	0.611	0.455	0.339	0.451	0.343
TANG	0.638	0.433	0.330	0.503	0.345
SAT1	0.561	0.484	0.384	0.479	0.380
SAT2	0.519	0.538	0.413	0.537	0.408
SAT3	0.506	0.538	0.417	0.540	0.420

Source: Developed by the author.

Table 15 presents the results of the PLSpredict assessment. All Q^2 predict values are positive, ranging from 0.506 to 0.638, indicating that the model has predictive relevance for all endogenous indicators. The comparison of prediction errors between the PLS-SEM model and the linear model benchmark provides a more nuanced picture of predictive performance. Based on RMSE, the PLS-SEM model outperformed the linear model for RELI, TANG, and SAT3, while the linear model produced slightly lower prediction errors for ASSU, EMPA, RESP, SAT1, and SAT2. Based on MAE, the PLS-SEM model performed better than or equal to the linear model for ASSU, RELI, RESP, TANG, and SAT3, whereas the linear model showed marginally lower errors for EMPA, SAT1, and SAT2. These mixed results suggest that the model has predictive relevance but does not consistently outperform the linear benchmark. Accordingly, the model's out-of-sample predictive performance is considered moderate.

5. Discussion

5.1 Overview of key findings

This study examined how social capital shapes service quality and tourist satisfaction in community-based tourism (CBT). Overall, the findings suggest that social capital is positively associated with service quality, which in turn contributes to tourist satisfaction. Service quality also mediates the relationship between social capital and satisfaction, indicating that the influence of social capital on tourist satisfaction operates largely through service-related mechanisms. These findings should be interpreted within the context of the sampled CBT destinations in Vietnam, but they also offer useful points of comparison with international research on social capital, service quality, and tourism experiences.

First, the positive relationship between social capital and service quality is broadly consistent with social capital theory, which views networks, trust, shared norms, and reciprocity as resources that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001). Trust, in particular, has also been discussed as a core element of social capital in international research (Szkudlarek & Biglieri, 2016). In tourism research, Jones (2005) shows that social capital is significant for understanding the formation and functioning of community-based ecotourism, while Pramanik et al. (2019) emphasize the role of trust and collective action in CBT. More recent evidence also suggests that social capital, reflected in trust, norms, and social networks, can support sustainable tourism development (Prayitno et al., 2023). The present study is consistent with this stream of research but extends it by showing that social capital is not only relevant to community participation or local development outcomes; it is also associated with tourists' perceptions of service quality.

This finding is particularly important in CBT, where service delivery is often decentralized and depends on cooperation among multiple local actors. Unlike conventional tourism enterprises, where service quality can be managed through formal organizational systems, CBT service quality is often shaped by informal coordination among residents, hosts, guides, service providers, and local authorities. In this sense, social capital functions as a form of relational infrastructure that supports communication, reduces uncertainty, and enables more coherent service delivery. This interpretation also resonates with service-dominant logic, which views service as a process of value co-creation among multiple actors rather than as a one-way delivery of value (Lusch & Vargo, 2014). Therefore, the findings add to international CBT research by clarifying how relational resources within and beyond the community may support the quality of tourists' service experiences.

Second, the finding that service quality positively influences tourist satisfaction is consistent with the broader tourism and hospitality literature. SERVQUAL conceptualizes service quality through dimensions such as tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1988). In the tourism context, prior studies have also shown that experience quality and service-related

evaluations are closely linked to satisfaction and subsequent behavioral outcomes (Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Chen & Chen, 2010). Evidence from broader service and management research also supports the role of service quality as a mechanism through which service-related factors influence customer satisfaction (Frimpong et al., 2023). The present study supports this relationship in CBT, where tourists' satisfaction is shaped not only by destination attributes, but also by the quality of interactions with local communities. Because CBT experiences involve close contact between tourists and residents, tourists may evaluate their experiences through the reliability of services, responsiveness of local providers, perceived safety, and the empathy shown by hosts.

Third, the mediation result provides a more mechanism-based explanation of how social capital translates into tourist satisfaction. Previous international studies have often emphasized that social capital benefits tourism development by strengthening community participation, cooperation, empowerment, and livelihood outcomes (Jones, 2005; Pramanik et al., 2019; Prayitno et al., 2023). However, less attention has been paid to the process through which community-level relational resources become visible to tourists. The present findings suggest that tourists may not perceive social capital directly as an abstract community resource. Rather, they experience its benefits through service quality, including smoother coordination, more consistent information, greater responsiveness, and more trustworthy interactions. This interpretation is also compatible with recent tourism research emphasizing the need to assess tourism development through both regional-level conditions and tourist-related evaluations (Gavurova et al., 2025). In this respect, service quality acts as a key pathway linking community dynamics with visitor-level outcomes.

At the same time, the direct effect of social capital on tourist satisfaction remains significant but relatively smaller. This result suggests that service quality does not fully explain the relationship between social capital and satisfaction. One possible interpretation is that social capital may also influence satisfaction through more intangible and experiential channels, such as perceived authenticity, emotional connection, hospitality, trust in the host community, and a sense of belonging. This interpretation is consistent with tourism experience research, which suggests that satisfaction is not only a response to functional service performance, but also reflects tourists' overall evaluation of affective, relational, and experiential aspects of the visit (Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Chen & Chen, 2010). It is also consistent with responsible tourism research, which highlights that responsible tourism service attributes can shape consumer choices and satisfaction with tourism products that respect sustainability principles ((Gallardo-Vázquez, 2023).

Compared with existing international research, the main contribution of this study lies in its integrated and mechanism-based approach. Rather than treating social capital as a broad or undifferentiated concept, this study conceptualizes it as a formative higher-order construct composed of bonding, bridging, and linking dimensions. Bonding social capital captures internal cohesion and close ties, bridging social capital reflects connections across groups, and linking social capital represents vertical relationships with institutions and governance structures (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). This approach recognizes that these dimensions perform different but complementary functions in CBT systems. The study therefore adds nuance to previous research by showing that social capital can be understood as a configuration of relational resources that supports both service delivery and tourist satisfaction.

Regarding generalizability, the findings should be interpreted with caution. The study is based on 375 domestic tourists from six CBT destinations in Vietnam, and the sample was not randomly selected. Therefore, the results should not be generalized statistically to all CBT destinations or all tourist populations. Rather, the findings provide context-specific evidence from a developing-country CBT setting, where community relationships, institutional linkages, and service coordination are central to destination performance. This contextual interpretation is consistent with regional tourism research showing that tourism development depends not only on destination-level resources but also on financing mechanism, public resources, infrastructure, and policy support at the regional level (Micháľková et al.,

2024). Recent sustainable tourism research has also highlighted the relevance of infrastructure, policy support, and cross-sector coordination in supporting tourism development (Iannaccone et al., 2025). In this respect, the study contributes to international CBT literature by offering analytically transferable evidence that can be compared with findings from other cultural, institutional, and tourism development contexts. Future cross-country and cross-cultural studies would be valuable to further examine whether similar mechanisms operate in other CBT settings.

5.2 Theoretical contributions

This study makes several important contributions to the literature.

First, a key contribution lies in conceptualizing and operationalizing social capital as a higher-order construct composed of bonding, bridging, and linking dimensions. Rather than treating these dimensions independently or as interchangeable indicators, this study models social capital as a formative higher-order component (HOC), capturing the multidimensional and configurational nature of social relationships in community-based tourism (CBT) contexts. This approach responds to ongoing debates in the literature regarding the conceptual ambiguity of social capital and provides a more theoretically consistent representation of its structure.

By adopting a higher-order modeling approach, the study demonstrates that different forms of social capital jointly contribute to a broader relational system, rather than reflecting a single underlying latent trait. This perspective aligns with the view that bonding, bridging, and linking social capital serve complementary rather than redundant roles, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of how social capital operates in tourism settings.

Second, the study extends the application of social capital in tourism research by linking it to service quality and tourist satisfaction, moving beyond the traditional focus on participation, governance, or development outcomes. This shift highlights the role of social capital as a driver of service performance and visitor experience, thereby enriching its explanatory power in tourism research.

Third, by integrating social capital theory with service quality and satisfaction frameworks, the study provides a mechanism-based explanation of how community-level relational structures translate into individual-level outcomes. In particular, the identification of service quality as a key mediating mechanism contributes to bridging macro-level social constructs with micro-level experiential evaluations.

5.3 Practical implications

The practical implications of this study should be interpreted not as broad, generic recommendations, but as mechanism-based interventions grounded in the multidimensional structure of social capital. Because bonding, bridging, and linking social capital perform distinct yet complementary roles, effective CBT strategies should move beyond general “community development” and instead focus on strengthening the specific relational dimensions and mechanisms that drive service quality and tourist satisfaction.

- Implications for Local Communities: Balancing Cohesion and Openness

The findings indicate that enhancing social capital can improve both service quality and tourist satisfaction. Importantly, this effect does not arise from social capital in a general sense, but from the configuration of bonding, bridging, and linking ties. At the community level, bonding social capital is particularly important for building trust, reciprocity, and shared norms - all of which support coordinated action and consistent service delivery in CBT. From a mechanism perspective, trust reduces uncertainty and makes cooperation more likely among local actors. Accordingly, initiatives that strengthen cohesion - such as participatory decision-making, shared cultural activities, and cooperative service provision - can enhance the reliability and perceived authenticity of the tourism experience. At the same time, prior

research cautions that excessively strong bonding can create network closure, reducing openness to external knowledge and limiting innovation. Practically, this means communities should strengthen cohesion while also avoiding over-embeddedness. Encouraging exposure to new practices and diverse perspectives is necessary to sustain learning and service improvement over time.

- Implications for Policymakers: Strengthening Bridging and Linking Mechanisms

For policymakers, the results suggest that improving CBT outcomes requires more than investment in infrastructure or marketing. It also depends on creating the relational conditions that enable communities to access external resources, knowledge, and institutional support. Bridging social capital helps communities connect with other groups, networks, and markets. These connections facilitate knowledge exchange, innovation, and entrepreneurial opportunities. Policies that promote inter-community collaboration, partnerships with private-sector actors, and participation in destination or regional tourism networks can strengthen these bridging functions. In parallel, linking social capital connects communities to formal institutions, governance systems, and funding mechanisms. This dimension is especially important in CBT contexts where communities often face structural constraints. Strengthening linking ties - through training programs, supportive policies, and coordination across agencies - can improve resource access, raise service standards, and support long-term sustainability. From a theoretical standpoint, these interventions work by improving both horizontal connectivity (bridging) and vertical integration (linking), thereby expanding a community's capacity to mobilize resources and coordinate action across multiple levels of the tourism system.

- Implications for Tourism Operators: Viewing Service Quality as a Collective Outcome

The findings also have direct implications for tourism operators. Service quality in CBT should not be viewed as the product of isolated individual performance. Instead, it is co-produced through community-level interactions across multiple service touchpoints. This reflects the idea that social capital acts as relational infrastructure: trust, shared norms, and network coordination shape how smoothly services are delivered and how positively tourists experience interactions with hosts and service providers. Therefore, capacity-building should not focus only on technical training (e.g., hospitality skills). It should also include interventions that strengthen social relationships, communication, and collaboration among stakeholders. Examples include joint training programs involving multiple community actors, locally agreed service standards, and collaborative governance structures that clarify roles and support coordination. Such approaches can improve both coordination effectiveness and interaction quality, shifting the focus from an individual-centric view of service quality to a more collective and socially embedded perspective.

- Integrative Insight: Social Capital as Relational Infrastructure for CBT Service Systems

Taken together, these implications reinforce a central insight of the study: social capital functions as a form of relational infrastructure that underpins service delivery in CBT. Rather than acting as a direct input, social capital influences outcomes through mechanisms such as trust, networks, and shared norms, which jointly shape coordination, interaction quality, and ultimately tourist satisfaction. Importantly, these mechanisms emerge from the combined configuration of bonding, bridging, and linking ties, rather than from any single dimension alone. Consequently, CBT development strategies are likely to be more effective when they adopt a configuration-based approach - one that balances internal cohesion, external connectivity, and institutional integration to achieve sustainable improvements in service quality and tourist satisfaction.

5.4 Limitations and future research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged, which also open up avenues for future research.

First, the use of a cross-sectional research design limits the ability to make strong causal inferences. Although the structural relationships are theoretically grounded and statistically supported,

the temporal dynamics of social capital and service quality remain unobserved. Social capital, in particular, is inherently dynamic and evolves through repeated interactions over time. Future research could therefore adopt longitudinal or panel data designs to examine how bonding, bridging, and linking social capital develop and interact across different stages of tourism development, as well as how these changes influence service quality and tourist satisfaction over time.

Second, this study is conducted within the context of community-based tourism in Vietnam, using data from 375 domestic tourists across six CBT destinations. While the sample size is adequate for PLS-SEM and appropriate for testing the proposed theoretical relationships, the sampling strategy was non-probabilistic and therefore does not allow the findings to be interpreted as statistically representative of the broader population of CBT tourists. Moreover, the focus on domestic tourists limits the extent to which the results can be generalized to international visitors or to CBT contexts in other countries. As such, the findings should be understood as context-specific evidence from the sampled destinations rather than as broadly generalizable conclusions. Future research could employ probability sampling, include a larger and more diverse set of CBT destinations, and compare domestic and international tourists. Cross-country or cross-cultural comparative studies would also be useful for examining how different institutional environments, cultural norms, and governance models influence the role of social capital in tourism systems.

Third, this study conceptualizes social capital as a formative higher-order construct composed of bonding, bridging, and linking dimensions. While this approach offers a more parsimonious and theoretically coherent representation, it also abstracts from potential interactions among these dimensions. Future research could explore more complex model specifications, such as examining the interaction effects or configuration patterns of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital, or adopting configurational approaches (e.g., fsQCA) to better capture the combinatory nature of social relationships in CBT contexts.

Fourth, although the study identifies service quality as a key mediating mechanism, it does not exhaust the range of possible pathways through which social capital influences tourist outcomes. Tourism experiences are inherently multidimensional, and social capital may also shape outcomes through affective and symbolic mechanisms. Future research could incorporate additional mediators, such as perceived authenticity, emotional engagement, destination image, or trust in the community, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how social capital translates into tourist satisfaction and behavioral intentions.

Finally, from a methodological perspective, this study relies on self-reported data collected from tourists, which may be subject to common method bias and perceptual limitations. Although procedural remedies were applied, future research could strengthen robustness by integrating multiple data sources, such as combining tourist perceptions with objective performance indicators or community-level data. Multi-level research designs that capture both community-level social capital and individual-level tourist responses would be particularly valuable in advancing the understanding of social capital in tourism systems.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how social capital shapes service quality and tourist satisfaction in community-based tourism (CBT) contexts. Drawing on a multidimensional conceptualization of social capital, the study demonstrates that bonding, bridging, and linking relationships jointly form a higher-order construct that significantly influences tourism outcomes.

The findings reveal that social capital plays a central role in enhancing service quality, which in turn serves as a key mechanism driving tourist satisfaction. While a direct effect of social capital on satisfaction remains, the results indicate that its primary influence is transmitted through service-related

interactions. This highlights the importance of understanding social capital not merely as a background condition, but as an active relational system that shapes how tourism services are produced and experienced.

A major contribution of this study lies in conceptualizing social capital as a formative higher-order component. By modeling bonding, bridging, and linking as complementary dimensions rather than isolated constructs, the study provides a more coherent and parsimonious representation of social capital in CBT settings. This approach helps address the longstanding conceptual ambiguity in the social capital literature and offers a stronger foundation for future empirical research.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw strong causal inferences, particularly given the dynamic nature of social capital. Future research could adopt longitudinal approaches to capture how different dimensions of social capital evolve over time and influence service outcomes across different stages of tourism development. Second, the study is situated within the context of Vietnam, and the findings may be shaped by specific cultural and destination-management conditions. Therefore, the results should be interpreted as context-specific rather than statistically generalizable to all CBT settings. Comparative research across different countries or governance settings would help examine the boundary conditions and analytical transferability of the proposed relationships. Third, while this study focuses on service quality as a key mediating mechanism, other pathways - such as perceived authenticity, emotional engagement, or destination image - may also play important roles and warrant further investigation. Finally, future studies could extend the current modeling approach by examining interaction effects or alternative configurations of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital, as well as by employing multi-level or mixed-method designs to better capture the complexity of tourism systems.

Overall, this study contributes to advancing the integration of social capital theory with service quality and tourism research. By identifying service quality as a key mediating mechanism and conceptualizing social capital as a higher-order construct, the study provides a more comprehensive explanation of how community-level relational structures may translate into individual-level tourism experiences in CBT settings in Vietnam. Future research building on this framework can further examine whether similar mechanisms operate in other cultural, institutional, and tourism development contexts, thereby clarifying the boundary conditions and analytical transferability of the proposed relationships.

Acknowledgement

This study was funded by project code MHN2026-OU5-01.39 from Hanoi Open University, Hanoi, Vietnam.

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