



Understanding domestic tourists' willingness to pay for green tourism products: A qualitative study in Ninh Binh Province, Vietnam

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Abstract:

This study explores how domestic tourists construct and justify their willingness to pay (WTP) for green tourism products in Ninh Binh Province, Vietnam. Departing from dominant quantitative models that treat WTP as a static economic outcome, this research employs a qualitative interpretive design to unpack the underlying meaning-making processes and moral reasoning. Findings reveal that WTP is not a direct response to environmental concern but a layered and conditional interpretive process. First, perceived experiential value functions as a necessary threshold; tourists accept price premiums only when green attributes deliver tangible sensory or emotional benefits. Second, moral reasoning acts as a moderating layer where evaluations of fairness, authenticity, and responsibility determine whether willingness is sustained or withdrawn. Finally, institutional trust and place-based governance serve as structural conditions that stabilize WTP over time. By synthesizing these dimensions into an "integrated interpretive pathway," the study challenges linear attitudinal models and highlights the context-dependent nature of green consumption in emerging tourism markets. These insights provide a critical foundation for destination managers to align green pricing strategies with tourists' experiential expectations and institutional credibility.

Keywords: Willingness to pay, Green tourism products, Qualitative research, Domestic tourists, Interpretive framework, Ninh Binh Province

1. Introduction

In recent years, the transition towards sustainable and green tourism has emerged as a central concern within both academic discourse and tourism governance frameworks, particularly in destinations facing increasing environmental pressures from mass tourism. Green tourism products - characterized by environmentally responsible practices, reduced ecological footprints, and contributions to local sustainability - are increasingly promoted as strategic instruments to reconcile tourism development with environmental protection [1], [2]. However, the effectiveness of such products ultimately depends not only on supply-side initiatives but also on tourists' behavioral responses, especially their willingness to financially support green attributes through higher prices or additional fees.

Within this context, tourists' willingness to pay (WTP) has become a critical indicator for assessing the economic viability and long-term sustainability of green tourism products. Prior international studies have demonstrated that tourists may be willing to pay a premium for environmentally responsible tourism offerings when such products align with their environmental values, perceived benefits, and ethical considerations [3], [4]. Nevertheless, empirical evidence also indicates a persistent gap between pro-environmental attitudes and actual payment behavior, raising questions about the underlying motivations and meanings tourists attach to "green" tourism experiences [1].

Despite the growing body of literature on WTP in tourism, existing research has been dominated by quantitative approaches, particularly contingent valuation and choice experiments, which primarily estimate

payment levels and statistically test influencing factors [5]-[7]. While these approaches provide valuable measurement outcomes, they offer limited insight into the interpretive processes through which tourists understand, evaluate, and justify their willingness - or reluctance - to pay for green tourism products. As a result, the subjective meanings, moral reasoning, and experiential dimensions that shape WTP decisions remain underexplored, especially in non-Western and emerging tourism contexts.

This limitation is particularly evident in the context of domestic tourism in developing countries, where tourists' environmental awareness, income structures, cultural values, and expectations of public versus private responsibility for environmental protection may differ substantially from those assumed in established theoretical models. In Vietnam, green tourism has been increasingly incorporated into national and local development strategies, yet empirical research on tourists' economic support for green initiatives remains fragmented and largely quantitative [8], [9]. Moreover, there is a notable lack of qualitative, context-sensitive investigations that explore how domestic tourists perceive green tourism products and how these perceptions translate into willingness to pay in practice.

Ninh Binh Province represents a particularly relevant case for addressing this gap. As a major domestic tourism destination with sensitive natural and cultural landscapes, Ninh Binh has actively promoted environmentally oriented tourism products while simultaneously experiencing rapid growth in visitor numbers. This tension raises important questions regarding whether domestic tourists perceive green tourism as a value-added experience worth paying for, a moral obligation, or a responsibility that should be borne by the state or service providers. Understanding these perceptions is essential for designing pricing mechanisms, communication strategies, and policy interventions that are both economically feasible and socially acceptable.

Against this backdrop, the present study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore domestic tourists' willingness to pay for green tourism products in Ninh Binh Province, Vietnam. Rather than estimating payment levels, the study seeks to unpack the underlying perceptions, values, and motivations that shape tourists' WTP decisions. By doing so, it aims to contribute to the literature in three key ways:

- *Enriching the theoretical understanding of WTP by foregrounding tourists' subjective interpretations*
- *Addressing the empirical gap in qualitative research on green tourism in developing-country contexts*
- *Providing context-specific insights to inform sustainable tourism management and policy design.*

2. Literature Review

2.1. Willingness to pay in green tourism

WTP has long been employed as a central analytical construct in tourism research to evaluate tourists' economic support for environmentally responsible practices. Within the green tourism literature, WTP is commonly conceptualized as an indicator of tourists' readiness to internalize environmental costs through price premiums, entrance fees, or voluntary contributions [4], [7]. This perspective aligns with classical economic valuation approaches, in which WTP functions primarily as a measurable outcome reflecting demand-side support for sustainability initiatives.

However, recent scholarship has increasingly problematized this instrumental understanding of WTP. Studies published in leading tourism journals suggest that WTP is not merely a function of income or price sensitivity but is deeply embedded in tourists' value systems, moral judgments, and perceptions of fairness [3], [5]. Agag et al. [3], for instance, demonstrate that even tourists expressing strong pro-environmental intentions may resist paying more when green attributes are perceived as symbolic, poorly communicated, or misaligned with personal benefit structures. This intention-behavior gap underscores the limitations of treating WTP as a purely economic variable detached from social and psychological contexts.

From this standpoint, WTP should be understood as a behavioral expression of negotiated meaning, rather than a stable preference. Tourists' decisions to pay - or not to pay - for green tourism products reflect how they interpret environmental responsibility, how they assign roles among stakeholders, and how they evaluate the legitimacy of pricing mechanisms. This interpretive dimension has become increasingly salient in sustainability-oriented tourism research, yet remains insufficiently theorized in many empirical studies.

2.2. Limitations of dominant quantitative approaches in wtp research

The majority of empirical research on WTP for green tourism products has relied on quantitative methodologies, particularly contingent valuation models and discrete choice experiments [4], [5], [7]. These

approaches have generated robust evidence regarding the statistical significance of factors such as environmental attitudes, destination image, and perceived quality in shaping tourists' willingness to pay premiums for sustainable tourism offerings. Nevertheless, scholars have raised concerns regarding the epistemological constraints of these methods. Quantitative models tend to assume that respondents possess stable preferences and clear monetary valuations, an assumption that may not hold in contexts where green tourism is a relatively new or ambiguously defined concept [5], [10]. Moreover, such approaches often capture *whether* tourists are willing to pay, but not *why* they attribute value to green tourism in particular ways, nor *how* they rationalize payment decisions in relation to broader social norms and expectations.

This methodological bias becomes especially problematic in destinations where green tourism policies are promoted top-down, and tourists may perceive environmental protection as a public responsibility rather than a market-based transaction. Without qualitative inquiry, the risk arises that WTP figures are interpreted in isolation from the cultural and institutional contexts that shape tourists' reasoning processes.

2.3. Perceived value, moral reasoning, and the social construction of WTP

An emerging strand of literature has begun to reconceptualize WTP through the lens of perceived value and moral evaluation. Rather than viewing WTP solely as an outcome of cost-benefit analysis, these studies emphasize the role of experiential, symbolic, and ethical dimensions in shaping tourists' payment decisions [6], [7]. Kim and Weiler [6] highlight that tourists' willingness to financially support environmental protection is closely linked to perceived restorative benefits and emotional connections to destination environments, suggesting that WTP is intertwined with affective and experiential factors.

Similarly, research on sustainable destinations indicates that tourists' WTP is influenced by their perceptions of authenticity, transparency, and the credibility of green claims [6]. When green tourism products are perceived as genuine contributions to environmental conservation rather than marketing tools, tourists are more likely to accept additional costs as morally justified. Conversely, skepticism toward greenwashing can suppress WTP even among environmentally conscious tourists.

These findings suggest that WTP operates as a socially constructed judgment, shaped by tourists' interpretations of fairness, trust, and responsibility. Importantly, such interpretations are context-specific and culturally embedded, reinforcing the need for qualitative approaches capable of capturing nuanced meaning-making processes.

2.4. Contextual gaps in developing and domestic tourism markets

While the international literature on WTP in green tourism has expanded rapidly, it remains heavily skewed toward Western and high-income tourism markets. In contrast, empirical research in developing countries, particularly focusing on domestic tourists, is comparatively limited and fragmented. Existing Vietnamese studies have primarily employed quantitative surveys to identify factors influencing WTP and revisit intentions, offering valuable baseline evidence but limited interpretive depth [8], [9].

Moreover, domestic tourists may exhibit distinct patterns of reasoning regarding environmental payments, shaped by income constraints, cultural norms, and expectations of state responsibility in heritage and environmental protection. National policy frameworks in Vietnam increasingly emphasize sustainable and green tourism development [12], [13], [14], yet the extent to which these policy narratives resonate with domestic tourists' perceptions and willingness to pay remains underexplored.

Ninh Binh Province, as a destination simultaneously promoted for its natural heritage and subjected to intensive tourism development, provides a critical context for examining these dynamics. Understanding how domestic tourists interpret green tourism products and negotiate their willingness to pay within this setting requires moving beyond variable-based explanations toward qualitative, context-sensitive inquiry.

2.5. Research gap and conceptual positioning

Synthesizing the above strands, three interrelated gaps can be identified in the existing literature. First, WTP in green tourism is still predominantly treated as a measurable outcome rather than an interpretive process. Second, methodological reliance on quantitative models limits insight into tourists' underlying motivations, moral reasoning, and value constructions. Third, empirical evidence from domestic tourism contexts in developing countries remains scarce, particularly from a qualitative perspective.

Table 1. Summary of key literature and research gaps on willingness to pay for green tourism

Analytical Dimension	Dominant Focus in Existing Literature	Key Limitations Identified	Positioning of the Present Study
Conceptualization of WTP	WTP treated primarily as an economic outcome or price premium indicator	Neglects interpretive, moral, and experiential dimensions of payment decisions	Re-conceptualizes WTP as a meaning-based and value-laden behavioral expression
Methodological Approach	Predominantly quantitative (contingent valuation, choice experiments)	Limited ability to capture tourists' reasoning, justifications, and ambivalence	Employs qualitative inquiry to explore underlying perceptions and motivations
Behavioral Interpretation	Focus on attitudes, intentions, and statistically significant predictors	Insufficient explanation of intention-behavior gaps and resistance to payment	Examines how tourists interpret responsibility, fairness, and legitimacy of green pricing
Contextual Scope	Western or high-income tourism markets dominate empirical evidence	Limited applicability to developing or transitional tourism contexts	Provides context-specific insights from a developing-country destination
Tourist Segment	International tourists or mixed samples prioritized	Domestic tourists underrepresented despite growing market significance	Centers on domestic tourists as key actors in sustainable tourism transitions
Policy Linkage	Weak integration between WTP findings and policy narratives	Limited guidance for destination-level pricing and governance mechanisms	Aligns tourists' perceptions with sustainability policy and management implications
Research Orientation	Outcome-driven (how much tourists pay)	Limited process-oriented understanding (why and how tourists decide to pay)	Adopts a process-oriented perspective emphasizing meaning-making and negotiation

Source: Synthesized by the authors based on selected literature [1]-[14]

Positioned at the intersection of these gaps, the present study adopts a qualitative approach to explore domestic tourists' willingness to pay for green tourism products in Ninh Binh Province. By foregrounding tourists' perceptions and interpretive frameworks, the study seeks to extend current understanding of WTP beyond economic valuation, contributing a contextually grounded perspective to the broader discourse on sustainable tourism

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design and study context

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design to examine domestic tourists' WTP for green tourism products. The choice of a qualitative approach is grounded in the recognition that WTP in the context of green tourism cannot be fully understood as a purely economic preference or price sensitivity indicator.

Instead, it reflects a subjective and contextually embedded judgment, shaped by tourists' interpretations of environmental responsibility, perceived value, and institutional trust.

From an epistemological standpoint, the study aligns with an interpretivist paradigm, which views meanings as socially constructed and negotiated through experience. This orientation allows the research to move beyond measuring "how much" tourists are willing to pay and instead focus on how and why payment decisions are justified, contested, or resisted.

The empirical context of the study is Ninh Binh Province, Vietnam, a leading domestic tourism destination characterized by karst landscapes, wetlands, and cultural heritage sites. In recent years, green tourism narratives have become increasingly prominent in destination branding and management, while environmental pressures associated with mass domestic tourism have intensified. This juxtaposition renders Ninh Binh a particularly relevant setting for exploring how domestic tourists interpret green tourism products and assess the legitimacy of paying for environmental protection within a predominantly state-regulated tourism context

3.2. Research questions

Consistent with its interpretive orientation, the study is guided by exploratory research questions rather than hypotheses. This approach reflects the absence of a stable theoretical consensus on how domestic tourists in developing tourism contexts conceptualize and evaluate green tourism pricing. The research addresses the following questions:

RQ1: How do domestic tourists perceive and interpret green tourism products in Ninh Binh Province?

RQ2: How do domestic tourists rationalize their willingness or reluctance to pay for green tourism products?

RQ3: What values, beliefs, and contextual considerations shape domestic tourists' willingness to pay for green tourism products?

Together, these questions are designed to uncover the interpretive logic underlying payment decisions, including moral reasoning, perceived trade-offs, and evaluations of responsibility and fairness.

3.3. Data collection and participants

Primary data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with domestic tourists who had recently visited Ninh Binh Province. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that participants possessed relevant experiential knowledge of tourism products commonly framed as "green" or environmentally responsible.

The interview guide was intentionally flexible, allowing participants to articulate their own understandings and evaluative frameworks rather than respond to predefined valuation scenarios. Key discussion areas included tourists' interpretations of green tourism, perceived experiential and symbolic value, attitudes toward price premiums or environmental fees, and perceptions of responsibility allocation among tourists, tourism businesses, and public authorities.

Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, at which point additional interviews no longer generated substantively new insights into tourists' willingness to pay.

3.4. Analytical framework and data analysis

Data analysis was guided by a second-level analytical scheme, which conceptualizes willingness to pay as a multi-dimensional interpretive construct rather than a single behavioral outcome. At the first analytical level, the framework comprises three interrelated dimensions:

- *Perceived value of green tourism products,*
- *Moral and responsibility reasoning, and*
- *Perceived legitimacy and trust.*

At the second analytical level, these dimensions are further elaborated to capture analytical nuance. Perceived value encompasses experiential satisfaction, symbolic alignment with pro-environmental identities, and instrumental trade-offs between cost and convenience. Moral and responsibility reasoning focuses on how tourists attribute responsibility for environmental protection and evaluate whether paying for green tourism is a voluntary ethical choice or an imposed obligation. Perceived legitimacy and trust addresses tourists' assessments of the credibility of green claims, transparency in environmental fee usage, and trust in tourism operators and governing institutions.

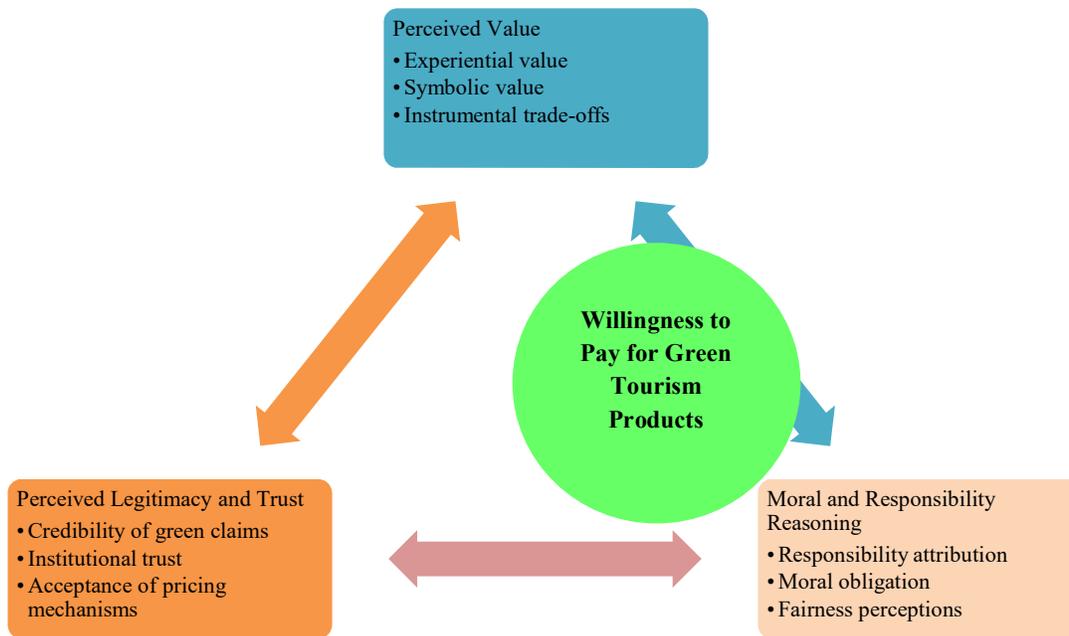


Figure 1. Analytical framework for understanding domestic tourists' willingness to pay for green tourism products

Source: Authors' compilation, 2026.

An iterative thematic analysis was conducted, combining inductive coding with theory-informed interpretation. Constant comparison across interviews enabled the identification of convergent and divergent patterns, while reflexive memo-writing supported analytical rigor and coherence.

3.5. Research rigor and ethical considerations

The rigor of the study was ensured through established qualitative quality criteria. Credibility was enhanced by prolonged engagement with participants and iterative probing during interviews. Dependability was supported through systematic documentation of analytical procedures, while confirmability was addressed through reflexive practices acknowledging the researcher's interpretive role.

Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, the study emphasizes analytical transferability, allowing findings to inform understanding of domestic tourists' willingness to pay in similar tourism contexts.

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed in data handling and reporting

4. Results & Analysis

Guided by the analytical framework presented in Figure 1, this section reports and discusses the findings derived from the qualitative analysis of domestic tourists' accounts. The analysis reveals that willingness to pay (WTP) for green tourism products is not an immediate or uniform response, but a conditional and negotiated outcome, shaped through tourists' interpretations of value, moral responsibility, and institutional legitimacy. Across the dataset, recurring interpretive patterns emerged concerning how domestic tourists make sense of paying for green tourism products. These patterns are unpacked in the following subsections, where empirical insights are organized around the key analytical dimensions of perceived value, moral reasoning, and legitimacy and trust.

4.1. Perceived value as an experiential threshold for willingness to pay

Analysis of interview narratives indicates that domestic tourists WTP for green tourism products is primarily shaped through how value is interpreted and experienced, rather than through abstract environmental concern or generalized pro-sustainability attitudes. Across the dataset, participants consistently emphasized that their acceptance of higher prices or additional payments depended on whether green tourism products generated recognizable benefits at the experiential level.

Importantly, perceived value did not emerge as a singular or homogeneous construct. Instead, tourists articulated value through multiple evaluative lenses, combining immediate sensory and emotional experiences

with broader symbolic meanings and practical considerations. These value judgments were often provisional and subject to revision as tourists reflected on their experiences, compared expectations with outcomes, and assessed whether green attributes translated into tangible improvements in their travel experience. Such accounts suggest that willingness to pay is not triggered simply by labeling tourism products as “green,” but by tourists’ ongoing interpretive work in determining whether these products offer meaningful, credible, and worthwhile value. The key dimensions and interpretive patterns through which perceived value shapes willingness to pay are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Key themes and interpretive patterns related to perceived value and WTP

Analytical Dimension	Sub-theme	Interpretive Pattern	Empirical Meaning Derived from Interviews
Perceived Value	Experiential value	Tangible experience as a precondition for WTP	Tourists accept paying more only when green attributes are directly felt through environmental quality, atmosphere, or emotional restoration
Perceived Value	Symbolic value	Ethical self-identity is conditional	Paying is associated with being environmentally responsible only when green claims are perceived as authentic
Perceived Value	Instrumental trade-offs	Practical costs constrain WTP	Willingness declines when green tourism is perceived as inconvenient or lacking adequate service quality

Source: *Qualitative interviews and thematic analysis by the authors, 2026*

The findings summarized in Table 2 demonstrate that perceived value functions as an experiential threshold for willingness to pay, rather than as a linear determinant. Domestic tourists did not approach green tourism products with fixed valuations; instead, they continuously assessed whether green attributes produced discernible experiential enhancements. When such enhancements were absent or ambiguous, willingness to pay was suspended, regardless of participants’ stated environmental awareness.

Experiential value emerged as particularly salient in shaping initial openness to paying. However, this openness remained fragile and reversible. Even when tourists acknowledged environmental benefits, willingness to pay weakened if experiential improvements were perceived as marginal or symbolic rather than substantive. This underscores the importance of grounding green tourism value in sensory, emotional, and situational experiences, rather than relying on abstract sustainability narratives.

Symbolic value contributed to willingness to pay by allowing tourists to align payment with ethical self-concepts. Yet this alignment was contingent upon perceived authenticity. When green claims were suspected of being superficial or commercially motivated, symbolic value eroded rapidly, transforming willingness into skepticism. This finding highlights the vulnerability of symbolic motivations in contexts where trust in green marketing is uneven.

Instrumental trade-offs further constrained value-based willingness to pay. Domestic tourists frequently evaluated green tourism products against practical benchmarks, including comfort, convenience, and service quality. When green practices were perceived to impose additional burdens without compensatory benefits, willingness to pay declined. Such evaluations reveal that domestic tourists engage in context-sensitive cost-benefit reasoning, even within an interpretive and value-laden decision process.

Beyond the dimensions captured in Table 2, the analysis reveals two broader issues that further nuance the relationship between perceived value and willingness to pay. First, tourists’ value interpretations were comparative rather than absolute. Participants frequently assessed green tourism products by comparing them with previous travel experiences or alternative destinations, suggesting that willingness to pay is shaped by relative, not intrinsic, valuations.

Second, perceived value was closely intertwined with expectations formed prior to travel. When expectations of green tourism were unmet, disappointment amplified resistance to paying, even when objective environmental standards were present. This indicates that willingness to pay is influenced not only by actual experience but also by the alignment between expectations and outcomes, reinforcing the interpretive and temporal nature of value construction.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that perceived value operates as a dynamic and negotiated foundation for willingness to pay. Rather than serving as a stable predictor, value perception constitutes the first critical stage in a broader interpretive process through which domestic tourists decide whether paying for green tourism products is justified.

4.2. Moral reasoning and conditional environmental commitment in WTP

Building on perceived value as a necessary experiential threshold, this section examines how moral reasoning conditionally moderates domestic tourists' WTP for green tourism products. Interview data indicate that moral considerations do not independently initiate payment decisions. Instead, they operate as a secondary interpretive layer through which tourists evaluate whether paying a price premium for green tourism is ethically justified, fair, and meaningful. In this sense, moral reasoning functions less as a primary motivation and more as a mechanism that stabilizes or withdraws willingness to pay once experiential value has been established.

Participants frequently expressed environmental concern and ethical awareness in their narratives. However, such expressions rarely translated into unconditional willingness to pay. Moral commitment was articulated as contingent upon prior experiential satisfaction and trust in the credibility of green tourism practices. When experiential value was perceived as insufficient or ambiguous, moral reasoning was not mobilized to compensate for this gap. Rather than "paying for the environment" in the abstract, tourists framed payment decisions as morally acceptable only when green tourism products demonstrably delivered meaningful experiential and social benefits.

To ensure analytical transparency, Table 3 summarizes the principal moral reasoning pathways through which willingness to pay is moderated, based on recurrent interpretive patterns identified across the interview dataset.

Table 3. Moral reasoning pathways moderating WTP for green tourism products

Moral Reasoning Dimension	Interpretive Logic	Typical Narrative Orientation	Implication for WTP
Responsibility attribution	Evaluation of who should bear sustainability costs	Questioning whether environmental protection should be financed by tourists, businesses, or the state	WTP increases only when responsibility is perceived as fairly shared
Perceived authenticity	Assessment of sincerity behind green practices	Moral acceptance depends on trust in the intentions and transparency of green initiatives	Conditional WTP; skepticism weakens payment willingness
Ethical self-alignment	Alignment between payment and moral self-image	Paying is framed as ethical participation rather than moral obligation	WTP is stabilized post-experience
Moral fairness	Evaluation of price legitimacy	Price premiums assessed against perceived benefits and equity	Excessive premiums undermine moral justification

Source: Qualitative interviews and interpretive thematic analysis by the authors, 2026

The interpretive patterns summarized in Table 3 reveal that moral reasoning does not operate uniformly across domestic tourists. Instead, it is shaped by contextual judgments concerning fairness, responsibility, and authenticity. A prominent theme concerned the attribution of responsibility for environmental protection. Many participants questioned the moral legitimacy of transferring sustainability costs directly to tourists, particularly when tourism enterprises or governing bodies were perceived to derive substantial economic benefits from green branding. Under such circumstances, willingness to pay was framed not as a moral duty but as a potentially unjust burden.

Perceived authenticity further conditioned moral engagement. When green tourism practices were interpreted as sincere efforts to protect natural or cultural resources, tourists were more inclined to regard payment as a morally appropriate contribution. Conversely, when green initiatives were suspected of being commercially motivated or symbolic, moral justification rapidly eroded. In these cases, willingness to pay was actively withdrawn rather than passively withheld, reflecting a breakdown of trust rather than a lack of environmental concern.

Ethical self-alignment also played a nuanced role. For some participants, paying for green tourism products reinforced a positive moral self-image, allowing them to position themselves as responsible and conscientious tourists. Importantly, this alignment was rarely invoked prior to experience. Instead, it emerged retrospectively, as tourists reflected on experiences that resonated with their ethical values. Moral reasoning thus served to rationalize and stabilize willingness to pay after experiential validation, rather than functioning as an anticipatory driver.

Moral fairness constituted an additional constraint on willingness to pay. Tourists frequently evaluated green tourism prices against perceived experiential and social returns. When price premiums were deemed disproportionate to delivered benefits, moral acceptance weakened, even among participants expressing strong environmental concern. This indicates that moral reasoning is intertwined with practical evaluations, reinforcing the interpretive and context-sensitive nature of willingness to pay decisions. The moderating role of moral reasoning in the construction of willingness to pay is illustrated in Figure 2, which conceptualizes moral evaluation as an interpretive layer positioned between experiential value and the stabilization or withdrawal of payment willingness.

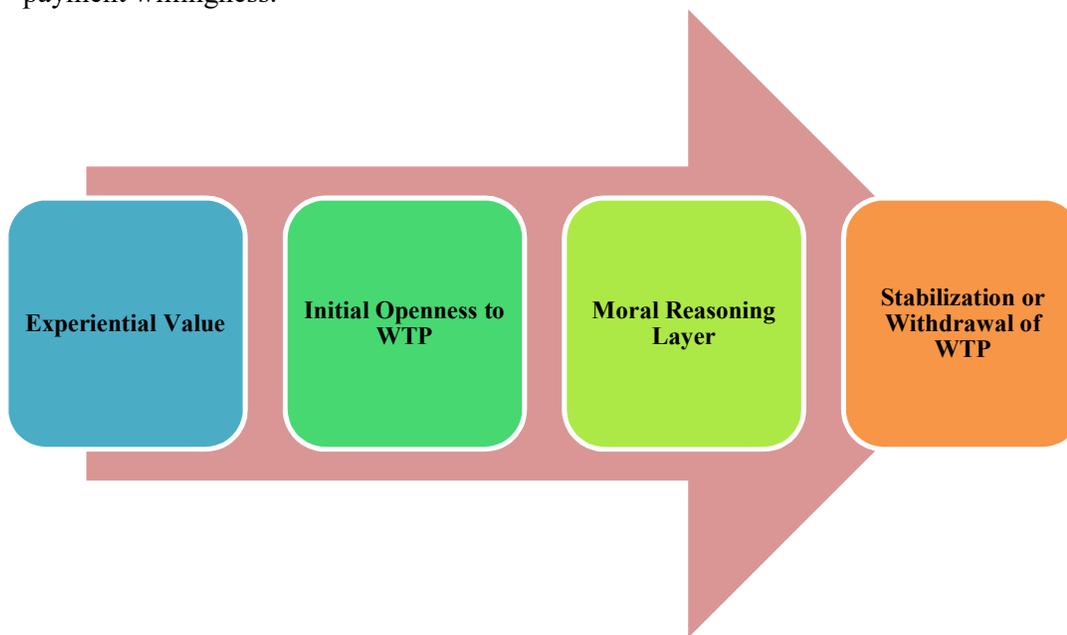


Figure 2. Moral reasoning as a moderating layer in the construction of WTP

Source: Authors' compilation, 2026.

These moral evaluations are particularly salient in the context of Ninh Binh Province, where green tourism initiatives are closely intertwined with heritage conservation, community livelihoods, and state-led sustainability narratives. Within this setting, domestic tourists' willingness to pay is shaped not only by personal experience but also by broader perceptions of institutional responsibility and the legitimacy of green tourism development.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that moral reasoning does not initiate willingness to pay but conditionally moderates whether such willingness is sustained or withdrawn once experiential value has been established. This helps explain why expressed environmental concern among domestic tourists does not consistently translate into higher willingness to pay and highlights the limitations of pricing strategies that rely solely on ethical appeals without delivering credible experiential value.

4.3. Institutional trust, transparency, and place-based governance in the stabilization of WTP

While experiential value initiates WTP and moral reasoning conditionally legitimizes it, interview data indicate that institutional trust and place-based governance play a critical role in determining whether such willingness is sustained over time. In the context of green tourism, domestic tourists' payment decisions were not solely shaped by personal experience or ethical reflection but were embedded within broader evaluations of how destinations are governed, how sustainability claims are enacted, and whether responsible institutions are perceived as credible and accountable.

Participants consistently framed willingness to pay as a judgment not only about the product itself but also about the system behind the product. Even when experiential value was high and moral acceptance was present, WTP remained fragile in the absence of trust in the institutions responsible for managing green tourism initiatives. This finding suggests that willingness to pay should be understood as a relational and institutionalized process rather than a purely individual decision.

Institutional Trust

Institutional trust emerged as a foundational condition shaping tourists' confidence that additional payments would generate meaningful outcomes. Rather than demanding detailed technical evidence of sustainability standards, participants relied on interpretive cues related to the perceived competence, integrity, and accountability of destination authorities and tourism operators. Trust was constructed through accumulated impressions of how environmental protection, visitor management, and heritage conservation were handled in practice.

When governing institutions were perceived as capable and genuinely committed to sustainability objectives, tourists expressed greater readiness to accept higher prices or supplementary fees. In such cases, willingness to pay was framed as a contribution to collective goals rather than as an isolated consumer expense. Conversely, weak institutional trust undermined WTP even when tourists acknowledged the environmental intentions of green tourism products. Skepticism toward authorities or operators translated into doubts about whether payments would be used effectively, leading tourists to withhold or retract their willingness to pay.

Importantly, institutional trust functioned as a stabilizing mechanism rather than a motivational trigger. It did not generate willingness to pay independently but determined whether existing willingness could be maintained without erosion. This reinforces the interpretation of WTP as a layered process in which institutional confidence consolidates earlier experiential and moral evaluations.

Transparency and Credibility

Transparency constituted a key pathway through which institutional trust was either reinforced or weakened. Participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of being able to observe, understand, or verify how green tourism practices were implemented. Visible environmental management, clear communication regarding conservation efforts, and tangible signs of reinvestment were interpreted as indicators of credibility.

When transparency was perceived as high, tourists were more inclined to regard price premiums as justified and legitimate. Transparency reduced interpretive uncertainty by providing concrete reference points through which tourists could assess whether sustainability claims were substantively enacted. In contrast, opaque practices or vague sustainability narratives intensified skepticism and weakened willingness to pay, even among participants who expressed strong environmental concern.

These findings suggest that transparency does not merely enhance information availability but actively shapes tourists' interpretive frameworks. By reducing ambiguity, transparency enables tourists to translate experiential satisfaction and moral acceptance into sustained willingness to pay. Without such clarity, willingness remains provisional and susceptible to rapid withdrawal.

Place-Based Governance in Ninh Binh

Place-based governance emerged as a particularly salient dimension of willingness to pay in Ninh Binh Province, where green tourism development is closely intertwined with heritage conservation, protected landscapes, and state-led sustainability narratives. Participants evaluated green tourism products not in isolation but in relation to how tourism development appeared to align with the broader identity, integrity, and governance of the destination.

Tourists assessed whether sustainability narratives corresponded with observable destination conditions, including environmental quality, cultural preservation, and community involvement. When green tourism initiatives were perceived as coherently embedded within local governance structures, willingness to

pay was reinforced. In such cases, payment was framed as supporting a place-specific development trajectory rather than merely purchasing a green-labelled product.

Conversely, perceived inconsistencies between sustainability discourse and on-the-ground realities weakened trust and undermined WTP. Fragmented governance arrangements, unclear stakeholder coordination, or perceived disjunctions between conservation rhetoric and tourism practices led tourists to question the legitimacy of green pricing strategies. These evaluations highlight that willingness to pay is sensitive to place-based coherence, where governance credibility becomes inseparable from product credibility.

Taken together, the findings indicate that institutional trust, transparency, and place-based governance function as structural conditions that stabilize or destabilize willingness to pay for green tourism products. In the absence of credible governance frameworks, experiential value and moral reasoning alone are insufficient to sustain willingness to pay among domestic tourists. This underscores the importance of understanding WTP not merely as an individual preference but as an outcome shaped by institutional arrangements and destination-level governance contexts.

4.4. Integrated interpretive pathways of WTP

The preceding analyses demonstrate that domestic tourists' WTP for green tourism products is not driven by a single determinant but emerges through an integrated and sequential interpretive process. Rather than functioning as a direct response to environmental concern or sustainability labeling, WTP is progressively constructed through tourists' experiential evaluations, moral judgments, and assessments of institutional credibility. This section synthesizes the findings by articulating how these dimensions interact to form coherent interpretive pathways that either stabilize or undermine willingness to pay.

At the initial stage, perceived experiential value operates as a necessary condition that activates openness to paying. As shown in Section 4.1, tourists do not assign value to green tourism products in abstract terms; instead, value is interpreted through lived experience, sensory engagement, and emotional resonance. Without tangible experiential benefits, willingness to pay fails to materialize, regardless of stated environmental concern. Experiential value thus establishes the first interpretive threshold in the willingness-to-pay process.

Once experiential value is established, moral reasoning enters as a conditional evaluative layer. As discussed in Section 4.2, tourists assess whether paying a premium for green tourism is ethically justified, fair, and aligned with their moral self-concepts. Crucially, moral reasoning does not initiate willingness to pay. Instead, it moderates whether willingness formed through experiential satisfaction is legitimized and sustained. When green practices are perceived as authentic and responsibility for sustainability is viewed as fairly distributed, moral reasoning reinforces willingness to pay. Conversely, perceived greenwashing or moral unfairness destabilizes it.

Beyond individual-level evaluation, institutional trust and place-based governance function as structural conditions that determine whether willingness to pay can be maintained over time. As shown in Section 4.3, tourists situate their payment decisions within broader judgments about destination governance, transparency, and the credibility of sustainability commitments. In the context of Ninh Binh Province, where green tourism is closely linked to heritage conservation and state-led development narratives, confidence in institutional arrangements becomes inseparable from confidence in green tourism products themselves. Where governance is perceived as coherent and trustworthy, willingness to pay is consolidated; where it is fragmented or opaque, willingness erodes.

Importantly, these dimensions do not operate independently. Instead, they form interconnected interpretive pathways, in which breakdown at any stage can interrupt the willingness-to-pay process. Experiential value without moral legitimacy may generate short-term acceptance but not sustained willingness. Moral acceptance without institutional trust remains fragile. Likewise, strong governance signals cannot compensate for weak experiential value. Willingness to pay thus emerges only when all three interpretive layers align.

Figure 3 synthesizes these findings by illustrating willingness to pay as a layered interpretive pathway rather than a linear causal model. This framework highlights how domestic tourists actively interpret, negotiate, and reassess the meaning of paying for green tourism products over time, rather than responding mechanically to price signals or sustainability claims.

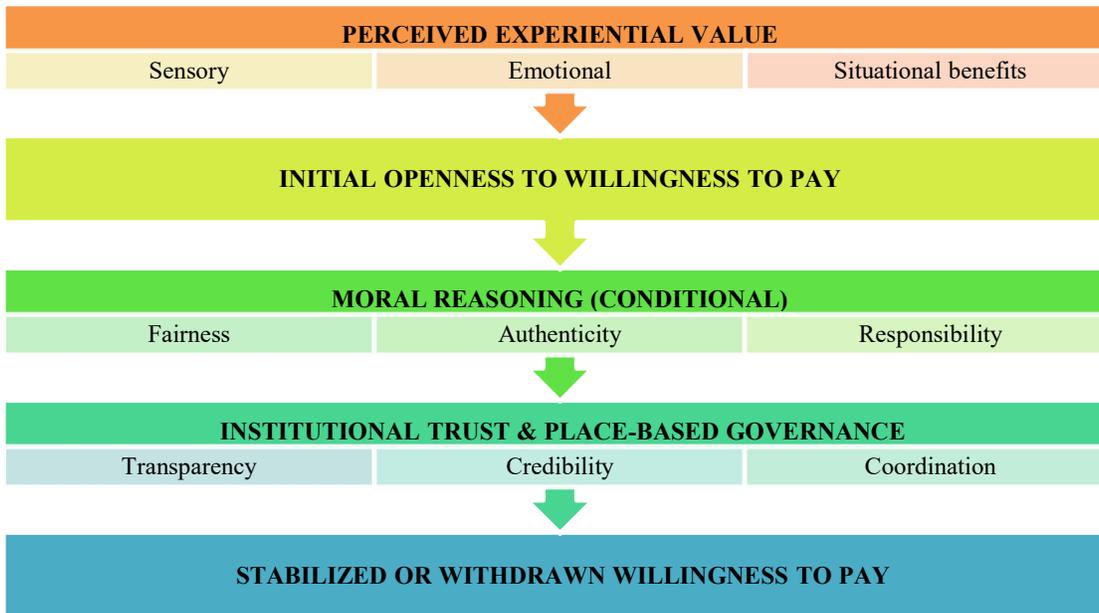


Figure 3. Integrated interpretive pathways of wtp for green tourism products

Source: Authors' synthesis based on qualitative interviews and interpretive analysis, 2026

Figure 3 synthesizes the core interpretive pathways through which domestic tourists construct their willingness to pay for green tourism products in Ninh Binh Province. Rather than operating as a direct outcome of environmental concern, willingness to pay emerges as a layered interpretive process shaped by experiential value assessments, moral reasoning, and institutional trust embedded within place-specific governance contexts. These pathways interact dynamically, reinforcing or constraining willingness to pay depending on how tourists evaluate authenticity, credibility, and perceived benefits of green practices. By integrating these dimensions, the findings move beyond linear or intention-based models of willingness to pay and highlight the contingent, negotiated, and context-dependent nature of green consumption in domestic tourism. The following section synthesizes these insights to address the research questions and hypotheses, and to articulate their theoretical and practical implications.

5. Conclusion

This qualitative study set out to advance understanding of domestic tourists' WTP for green tourism products through an in-depth investigation conducted in Ninh Binh Province, Vietnam. Departing from dominant approaches that conceptualize WTP as a function of environmental attitudes or pro-sustainability intentions, the study addressed how willingness to pay is constructed, negotiated, and stabilized in practice. By examining tourists' interpretive narratives, the study responds directly to the research questions concerning what shapes willingness to pay, how different evaluative dimensions interact, and why environmental concern does not consistently translate into payment behavior.

In response to the first research question regarding the foundational drivers of willingness to pay, the findings demonstrate that perceived experiential value constitutes a necessary condition for WTP among domestic tourists. As shown in Section 4.1, willingness to pay emerges only when green tourism products deliver tangible experiential benefits that are recognizable at the sensory, emotional, or situational level. This finding confirms that WTP is not triggered by sustainability labeling or environmental discourse alone, thereby rejecting any assumption that environmental awareness directly predicts willingness to pay. Instead, experiential value functions as an initial interpretive threshold that must be crossed before willingness to pay becomes conceivable.

The second research question addressed whether moral considerations independently motivate willingness to pay. The findings provide a more nuanced answer. As elaborated in Section 4.2, moral reasoning does not act as a primary driver of willingness to pay, but rather as a conditional moderating mechanism. Ethical considerations related to fairness, authenticity, and responsibility are mobilized selectively and retrospectively,

legitimizing payment decisions that are already grounded in experiential satisfaction. In this regard, the study does not support a hypothesis of unconditional moral motivation. Instead, it demonstrates that moral commitment reinforces willingness to pay only when green tourism practices are perceived as credible and when responsibility for sustainability is viewed as fairly distributed among stakeholders.

The third research question concerned the role of institutional context in shaping willingness to pay. The findings clearly indicate that institutional trust and place-based governance are critical for stabilizing willingness to pay over time. As discussed in Section 4.3, domestic tourists situate their payment decisions within broader evaluations of destination governance, transparency, and institutional credibility. In the specific context of Ninh Binh, where green tourism development intersects with heritage conservation and state-led sustainability narratives, trust in governing institutions becomes inseparable from trust in green tourism products themselves. The findings therefore support the proposition that willingness to pay is embedded within destination-level governance structures rather than being a purely individual or market-based choice.

By integrating these findings, the study resolves its overarching research question by conceptualizing willingness to pay as a layered interpretive process. As synthesized in Section 4.4, willingness to pay emerges only when three interdependent conditions align: experiential value initiates openness to payment, moral reasoning conditionally legitimizes it, and institutional trust stabilizes it. Breakdowns at any stage disrupt the process, explaining why stated environmental concern among domestic tourists does not consistently translate into higher willingness to pay for green tourism products.

The study contributes to the literature in three key ways. First, it challenges linear and attitudinal models of willingness to pay by demonstrating that WTP is interpretive, contingent, and context-dependent. Second, it foregrounds the role of domestic tourists, a group often underrepresented in green tourism research, particularly in emerging destinations. Third, by situating willingness to pay within the governance context of Ninh Binh Province, the study highlights the importance of place-based institutional arrangements in shaping economic behavior related to sustainability.

Overall, the findings suggest that fostering willingness to pay for green tourism products requires more than appealing to environmental values. It requires the careful alignment of experiential design, ethical credibility, and trustworthy governance. By elucidating how these elements interact in practice, this study offers a grounded and context-sensitive understanding of willingness to pay that is directly relevant to both academic debates and the sustainable development of domestic tourism destinations in Vietnam.

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