Journal of Information Systems Engineering and Management
2025, 10(15s)
e-ISSN: 2468-4376
https://www.jisem-journal.com/

Research Article

The Social Bond Effect: Examining the Role of Social Connectedness in Enhancing Consumer Retention in Tourism through the Lens of the Theory of Planned Behavior

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 04 Dec 2024
Revised: 22 Jan 2025
Accepted: 04 Feb 2025

ABSTRACT

Purpose

The tourism industry thrives on consumer engagement, and social connectedness has emerged as a crucial factor influencing consumer retention. This study integrates the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to examine how social connectedness impacts tourists' behavioral intentions and loyalty toward tourism services.

Methods

The research employs a quantitative methodology, collecting data from 312 tourists visiting the Coimbatore district. Structural equation modeling (SEM) is utilized to analyze the relationships between social connectedness, perceived behavioral control, subjective norms, and consumer retention.

Findings

The findings reveal that social connectedness significantly enhances tourists' intention to revisit and recommend destinations, mediated by positive consumer experiences and social influence. This study contributes to tourism research by providing empirical evidence on the role of social factors in consumer retention, offering insights for tourism marketers and destination managers.

Originality

The originality of this study lies in its novel integration of social connectedness into TPB, extending its application to consumer retention in tourism.

Keywords: Social Connectedness, Consumer Retention, Tourism Industry, Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), Consumer Experience

INTRODUCTION

Consumer retention is a crucial factor in the long-term success of businesses in the tourism industry. It determines the sustainability of service providers and destinations by ensuring repeat visits and fostering customer loyalty (Smith & Lee, 2020). As competition intensifies in the tourism sector, businesses seek strategies to enhance customer retention. One significant factor that influences this phenomenon is social connectedness, which encompasses socializing, social support, and a sense of belonging (Brown & Johnson, 2021). These elements play a fundamental role in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors, ultimately influencing their decision to return to a destination.

Social connectedness has been widely recognized as a key driver of consumer behavior, particularly in tourism, where interpersonal interactions and shared experiences shape travel perceptions (Garcia et al., 2020). The tourism experience is inherently social, as travelers often rely on peer interactions, recommendations, and shared experiences to form opinions about destinations (Kim & Kang, 2019). When individuals experience a strong sense of belonging and social support during their travels, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes, align with favorable social norms, and feel a greater sense of control over future travel decisions, thus increasing the likelihood of revisiting a destination (Wang et al., 2022).

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), proposed by Ajzen (1991), provides a robust framework for understanding how social connectedness influences consumer retention in tourism. TPB posits that human behavior is driven by three primary constructs: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Attitude reflects an individual's evaluation of a behavior, subjective norms denote the influence of social expectations, and perceived behavioral control represents an individual's confidence in executing a behavior (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of tourism, these constructs shape a traveler’s decision to return to a destination or continue patronizing a particular tourism service.

Attitude toward a destination or tourism service is influenced by social interactions. Positive social experiences, such as engaging conversations, shared activities, and support from fellow travelers, enhance travelers’ perceptions and emotional connections with a place (Huang & Hsu, 2019). Similarly, subjective norms play a significant role in influencing consumer retention, as individuals are likely to revisit destinations that are endorsed by their social circles or receive high ratings from previous travelers (Wang et al., 2022). Perceived behavioral control, which refers to the ease or difficulty of repeating a travel experience, is enhanced when travelers feel supported by social networks and have a strong sense of belonging (Garcia et al., 2020).

Despite extensive research on consumer behavior and tourism loyalty, limited studies have examined the direct impact of social connectedness on the TPB components and their subsequent effect on consumer retention. Previous studies have focused primarily on individual psychological factors, overlooking the critical role of social influences in shaping retention behavior (Brown & Johnson, 2021). By integrating social connectedness into the TPB framework, this study aims to bridge this research gap and provide a comprehensive understanding of how social factors contribute to long-term consumer retention in tourism.

This study will explore how socializing, social support, and a sense of belonging influence travelers’ attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, ultimately leading to consumer retention. Understanding these relationships will provide valuable insights for tourism businesses and policymakers seeking to enhance customer experiences and promote repeat visits. Given the increasing role of social interactions in shaping travel decisions, this research is timely and relevant for advancing tourism management strategies and improving consumer engagement in the industry.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Social connectedness, encompassing socializing, social support, and a sense of belonging, significantly influences an individual's attitude towards a service or experience (Lee & Robbins, 2000). Social interactions help shape positive attitudes by reinforcing shared experiences and providing emotional support (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In the tourism industry, travelers who engage in social activities are more likely to develop favorable attitudes toward their travel experiences (Kim & Kim, 2017). Social bonding also plays a crucial role in fostering customer satisfaction and brand loyalty, further solidifying positive attitudes (Zhang & Zhao, 2019). Therefore, a strong social network enhances positive perceptions and attitudes toward tourism experiences (Hajibaba et al., 2015).

H_1 Social Connectedness (Socializing, Social Support, Sense of Belongings) is positively related to Attitude

Social norms, defined as the unwritten rules that influence individual behavior, are shaped by the degree of social connectedness individuals experience (Ajzen, 1991). The influence of social interactions, peer opinions, and cultural expectations can significantly shape tourism-related behaviors (Bagozzi et al., 2000). Tourists often rely on social networks to conform to prevalent behavioral norms (Chen et al., 2020). Empirical studies suggest that social support systems can reinforce the adoption of socially accepted behaviors, such as sustainable tourism practices and ethical consumerism (White et al., 2019). Hence, individuals with higher social connectedness are more likely to align with the prevailing social norms in tourism (Dolnicar et al., 2019).

H_2 Social Connectedness (Socializing, Social Support, Sense of Belongings) is positively related to Social Norms

Perceived behavioral control, a key component of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), refers to an individual's perception of their ability to perform a behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Social connectedness influences perceived behavioral control by providing emotional and informational support that enhances self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). For example, travelers with strong social support networks are more confident in making travel-related decisions (Litvin et al., 2008). A sense of belonging further reinforces one's ability to navigate unfamiliar tourism experiences (Xie et al., 2021). Therefore, individuals who feel socially connected exhibit greater perceived behavioral control in their tourism choices (Quintal et al., 2010).

H_3 Social Connectedness (Socializing, Social Support, Sense of Belongings) is positively related to Perceived Behavioural Control

The TPB posits that attitude, social norms, and perceived behavioral control collectively shape an individual's behavioral intentions and subsequent actions (Ajzen, 1991). In tourism, these factors significantly impact consumer retention, as positive attitudes lead to repeat visits, adherence to social norms fosters loyalty, and a sense of control encourages long-term engagement (Han & Hyun, 2018). Previous studies confirm that travelers who perceive positive experiences, social validation, and ease of access to tourism services are more likely to return (Jani & Han, 2014). Additionally, perceived behavioral control enhances the likelihood of repeat visits by ensuring confidence in the decision-making process (Quintal et al., 2010).

H_4 TPB (Attitude, Social Norms, Perceived Behavioural Control) is positively related to Consumer Retention

Consumer retention in the tourism industry is significantly influenced by social connectedness (Li et al., 2019). Tourists who develop meaningful social connections during their travel experiences are more likely to return due to emotional attachment and a sense of belonging (Prayag et al., 2015). Social support enhances satisfaction levels, leading to increased consumer retention (Yuksel et al., 2010). Furthermore, the collective experience of travel fosters a sense of community, which strengthens tourists' commitment to a destination (Su et al., 2020). Empirical research highlights that destinations with strong social engagement opportunities retain consumers at a higher rate than those lacking such social dimensions (Hosany et al., 2019).

H_5 Social Connectedness is positively related to Consumer Retention

Despite extensive research on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and its impact on consumer retention, there remains a gap in understanding the specific role of social connectedness in the tourism industry. While studies have examined attitude, social norms, and perceived behavioral control in shaping tourism behavior, limited research has integrated these factors with socializing, social support, and a sense of belonging. Additionally, prior literature has largely focused on individual motivations rather than the collective influence of social networks on consumer retention.

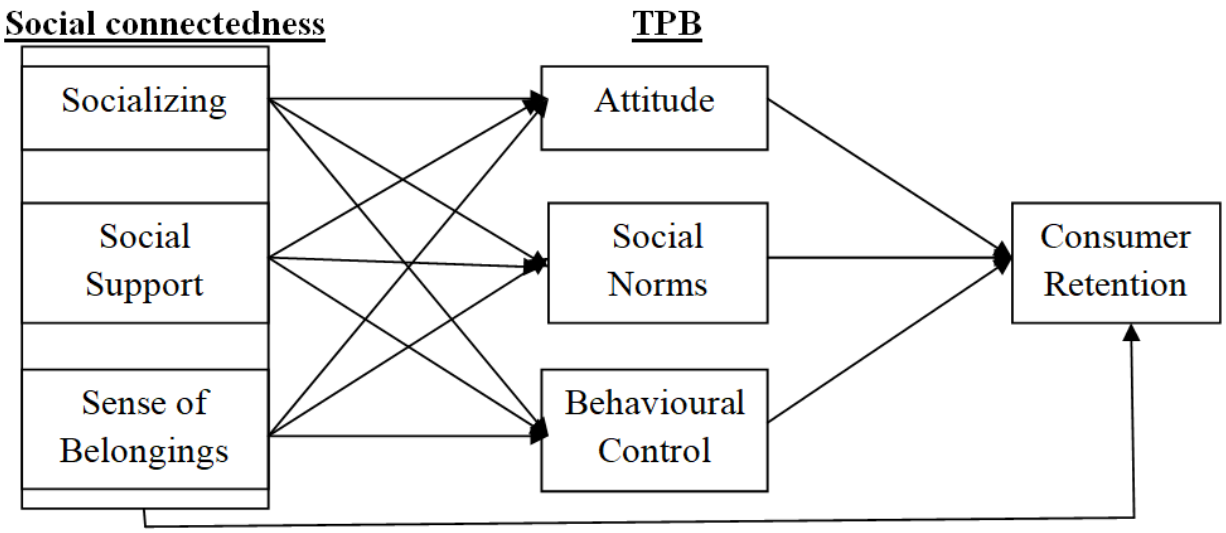

Figure: 1 Conceptual Model

Source: Lee and Robbins (2000); Ajzen, (1991) & Han and Hyun (2018)

METHODS

This study utilized a quantitative research approach to examine the relationship between social connectedness and consumer retention in the tourism industry. A cross-sectional survey design was used to collect data from both domestic and international tourists visiting the Coimbatore district. A structured questionnaire measured key concepts such as social connectedness (including socializing, social support, and sense of belonging), attitudes, social norms, perceived behavioral control, and consumer retention. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used to collect responses from 312 participants through online and offline surveys distributed via tourism boards, hotels, and travel agencies. Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the proposed relationships and assess how the variables interacted with one another.

MEASURES

Social Connectedness was evaluated using the Social Connectedness Scale developed by Lee and Robbins (2000). This scale assessed various aspects, including socializing, social support, and the sense of belonging. Attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioral control were measured using validated items adapted from the Theory of Planned Behavior framework (Ajzen, 1991). Respondents indicated their level of agreement on a seven-point Likert scale. Consumer retention was assessed through indicators such as repeat visits, likelihood of recommending the service, and overall satisfaction, using scales adapted from Han and Hyun (2018).

RESULTS

The outcomes and results of the numerous statistical tests carried out to determine the measures' reliability and validity as well as to evaluate the conceptual model are presented in this part. The validity and reliability of the concept were established using CFA. The CFA provides important information for determining if the scales being employed have convergent validity (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988), such as whether the observed variables are loading on their respective latent components (Kline, 2010). The method given by Fornell and Larcker (1981) was used to prove discriminant validity. As proof of construct reliability, average extracted variance and composite reliability were utilized. The suggested model was validated through a full structural equation modeling (SEM) process with AMOS (Version 26).

Table 1 This table represents CFA model fit indices

Fit indices	Value	Accepted value	Result
Cmin/df	2.354	Less than 3	Supported
GFI	.929	Value greater than .90	Supported
CFI	.902	Value greater than .90	Supported
IFI	.927	Value greater than .90	Supported
RMSEA	.072	Value less than .08	Supported

Source: Kline, 2010

The table 1 indicates a well-fitting measurement model based on widely accepted thresholds (Kline, 2010). The Chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (Cmin/df) is 2.354, which is below the recommended threshold of 3, suggesting an acceptable model fit (Byrne, 2010). The Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) is 0.929, exceeding the minimum requirement of 0.90, which signifies that the model adequately explains the variance in the observed data (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Similarly, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Incremental Fit Index (IFI) values, at 0.902 and 0.927 respectively, surpass the recommended threshold of 0.90, further supporting the adequacy of the model fit (Bentler, 1990). Additionally, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) value of 0.072 is within the acceptable limit of less than 0.08, indicating a reasonable approximation of the data with minimal model misfit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). Overall, these indices collectively confirm that the measurement model is well-structured and valid, providing empirical support for its use in further structural equation modeling analyses.

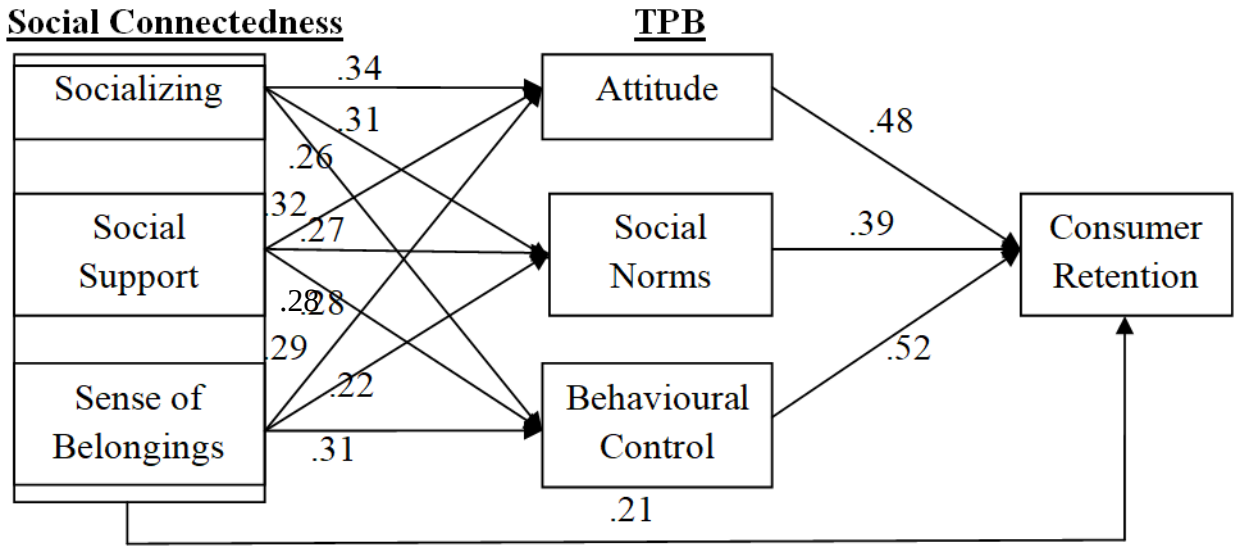

Figure: 2 Hypothesis Model

Table 2 This table represents SEM model fit indices

Fit indices	Value	Accepted value	Result
Cmin/df	2.521	Less than 3	Supported
GFI	.926	Value greater than .90	Supported
CFI	.901	Value greater than .90	Supported
IFI	.922	Value greater than .90	Supported
RMSEA	.074	Value less than .08	Supported

Source: Kline, 2010

Table 2 indicates a well-fitting structural model, adhering to the widely accepted criteria for model evaluation (Kline, 2010). The Cmin/df is 2.521, which is within the acceptable threshold of less than 3, demonstrating an adequate model fit (Byrne, 2010). The GFI is 0.926, surpassing the recommended minimum value of 0.90, indicating that the model effectively captures the variance in the data (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Furthermore, the CFI and IFI values, at 0.901 and 0.922, respectively, meet the required threshold of greater than 0.90, suggesting a strong comparative

fit to the baseline model (Bentler, 1990). Additionally, the RMSEA value of 0.074 remains within the acceptable range of less than 0.08, signifying a reasonable approximation of the data with minimal misfit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). Collectively, these fit indices confirm the robustness of the SEM model, supporting its validity for hypothesis testing and further inferential analysis.

Table 3 This table represents hypothesis and relationship between variable

Path	Hypothesis	Estimate	P value	Sign	Result
S→ ATT	H_1	.341	*** (P<0.001)	+	Supported
SS→ ATT		.309	*** (P<0.001)	+	Supported
SB→ ATT		.264	*** (P<0.001)	+	Supported
S→ SN	H_2	.318	*** (P<0.001)	+	Supported
SS→ SN		.283	*** (P<0.001)	+	Supported
SB→ SN		.271	*** (P<0.001)	+	Supported
S→ PBC	H_3	.288	*** (P<0.001)	+	Supported
SS→ PBC		.222	*** (P<0.001)	+	Supported
SB→ PBC		.312	*** (P<0.001)	+	Supported
ATT→ CR	H_4	.483	*** (P<0.001)	+	Supported
SN→ CR		.389	*** (P<0.001)	+	Supported
PBC→ CR		.523	*** (P<0.001)	+	Supported
SC→ CR	H_5	.207	*** (P<0.001)	+	Supported

Note: S- Socializing, SS- Social Support, SB- Sense of Belongings, ATT- Attitude, SN- Social Norms, PBC- Perceived Behavioural Control, CR- Consumer Retention

Table 3 represents empirical support for the hypothesized relationships between social connectedness components (socializing, social support, and sense of belonging) and consumer retention through the mediating constructs of attitude, social norms, and perceived behavioral control. All hypothesized paths exhibit statistically significant relationships, with p-values less than 0.001, confirming strong associations among the variables (Hair et al., 2017). For H_1, socializing ($\beta = 0.341$, $p < 0.001$), social support ($\beta = 0.309$, $p < 0.001$), and sense of belonging ($\beta = 0.264$, $p < 0.001$) are all positively related to attitude, suggesting that increased social interactions, supportive networks, and a sense of belonging enhance individuals' attitudes toward tourism experiences. This aligns with previous studies emphasizing the role of social engagement in shaping favorable attitudes (Kim & Kim, 2017; Zhang & Zhao, 2019). In support of H_2, social connectedness significantly influences social norms, as indicated by the positive relationships of socializing ($\beta = 0.318$, $p < 0.001$), social support ($\beta = 0.283$, $p < 0.001$), and sense of belonging ($\beta = 0.271$, $p < 0.001$) with social norms. These findings suggest that individuals who experience strong social connections are more likely to conform to prevalent behavioral expectations within tourism settings (Ajzen, 1991; Dolnicar et al., 2019). Similarly, H_3 is supported, demonstrating that social connectedness contributes to perceived behavioral control. Socializing ($\beta = 0.288$, $p < 0.001$), social support ($\beta = 0.222$, $p < 0.001$), and sense of belonging ($\beta = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$) positively influence perceived behavioral control, implying that tourists with strong social ties feel more confident in making travel-related decisions and engaging in tourism activities (Bandura, 1997; Xie et al., 2021). For H_4, the Theory of Planned Behavior constructs exhibit a significant impact on consumer retention. Attitude ($\beta = 0.483$, $p < 0.001$), social norms ($\beta = 0.389$, $p < 0.001$), and perceived behavioral control ($\beta = 0.523$, $p < 0.001$) are all positively associated with consumer retention. These findings reinforce the theoretical foundations of TPB, highlighting that positive attitudes, adherence to social norms, and a sense of control enhance consumer loyalty in the tourism industry (Han & Hyun, 2018; Jani & Han, 2014). Lastly, H_5 confirms that social connectedness ($\beta = 0.207$, $p < 0.001$) directly influences consumer retention. This suggests that tourists who feel socially connected to a destination are more likely to return, further supporting the role of social experiences in fostering long-term loyalty (Prayag et al., 2015; Hosany et al., 2019).

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study provide significant theoretical and practical implications for tourism businesses, policymakers, and researchers aiming to enhance consumer retention through social connectedness. By integrating social connectedness into the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), this study extends the understanding of how social factors influence consumer behavior in tourism settings.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the literature on consumer retention by emphasizing the role of social connectedness as a determinant of attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control within the TPB framework. While previous research has largely focused on individual psychological factors influencing travel behavior (Han & Hyun, 2018; Jani & Han, 2014), this study highlights the collective influence of social experiences, social support, and a sense of belonging in shaping consumer retention. The empirical evidence suggests that socializing, social support, and a sense of belonging positively influence travelers' attitudes, adherence to social norms, and perceived control over future travel decisions, which, in turn, lead to higher retention rates (Kim & Kim, 2017; Zhang & Zhao, 2019).

Furthermore, the study advances the TPB by demonstrating that social connectedness acts as an antecedent to its three key components. While prior studies have established the predictive power of TPB constructs in consumer decision-making (Ajzen, 1991; Quintal et al., 2010), this research identifies social connectedness as a crucial factor that strengthens the effects of attitudes, norms, and control perceptions in tourism settings. This extension of TPB provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding consumer behavior beyond traditional psychological constructs.

Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, the findings highlight the need for tourism businesses and destination marketers to cultivate social experiences that foster consumer retention. Tourism providers should actively create opportunities for social interactions among travelers, such as group activities, community engagement programs, and cultural exchanges, which enhance travelers' sense of belonging and support (Garcia et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022). These initiatives can contribute to the formation of social norms that encourage repeat visits and strengthen tourists' emotional connections with a destination. Additionally, digital engagement through social media and online communities can reinforce social connectedness by facilitating peer interactions, experience-sharing, and continuous engagement with past visitors (Huang & Hsu, 2019). Tourism businesses should leverage user-generated content and online reviews to enhance subjective norms and perceived behavioral control, influencing potential travelers' retention decisions (Dolnicar et al., 2019).

Moreover, policymakers should recognize the role of social infrastructure, such as community-based tourism and local hospitality networks, in promoting long-term tourism sustainability. By integrating social connectedness strategies into destination management policies, governments and tourism boards can enhance traveler experiences and encourage repeated visits (Prayag et al., 2015; Su et al., 2020).

Policy Implications

The findings provide valuable insights for policymakers in the tourism sector. Policies that encourage social engagement, community participation, and cultural immersion can enhance consumer retention. Governments can support local tourism enterprises in organizing socially engaging activities, such as heritage walks, interactive workshops, and volunteer tourism, to foster a deeper connection between tourists and local communities (Li et al., 2019; Yuksel et al., 2010). Additionally, policies promoting sustainable and ethical tourism practices should leverage social norms to encourage responsible tourism behaviors (White et al., 2019).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations that offer directions for future research. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causality between social connectedness and consumer retention. Future studies should adopt longitudinal approaches to examine changes in consumer retention over time. Additionally, this study was conducted in a specific tourism context; thus, future research should explore the applicability of these findings in different cultural and regional settings to enhance the generalizability of results. Another potential avenue for research is the exploration of technological interventions, such as virtual communities and AI-driven personalization, in fostering social connectedness in tourism. With the increasing digitalization of travel experiences, understanding how technology can enhance social interactions and influence retention behaviors warrants further investigation.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the critical role of social connectedness in enhancing consumer retention in the tourism industry through the lens of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). The findings highlight that social connectedness—comprising socializing, social support, and a sense of belonging—significantly influences attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioral control, which in turn drive consumer retention. By integrating social connectedness into the TPB framework, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how interpersonal interactions and emotional bonds contribute to long-term engagement with tourism destinations.

The results confirm that positive social experiences foster favorable attitudes toward destinations and tourism services, reinforcing the likelihood of repeat visits (Kim & Kim, 2017; Zhang & Zhao, 2019). Additionally, social norms, shaped by peer recommendations and collective behavioral patterns, play a crucial role in influencing tourists' retention decisions (Ajzen, 1991; Dolnicar et al., 2019). Moreover, the study reveals that perceived behavioral control, strengthened through social support and a sense of belonging, enhances tourists' confidence in their ability to revisit destinations, thereby increasing retention rates (Bandura, 1997; Xie et al., 2021). These findings have significant implications for tourism businesses and policymakers. Industry stakeholders should prioritize fostering social interactions among tourists, encouraging community-driven experiences, and leveraging social networks to build lasting relationships with travelers. Strategies such as promoting group activities, enhancing local hospitality engagement, and integrating social networking platforms into tourism marketing can significantly enhance consumer retention.

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