บทบาทของความใกล้ชิดในความสัมพันธ์ของคู่รักและความตั้งใจในการแนะนำ

The role of relationship closeness in coupled tourists' recommendation intentions

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บทคัดย่อ

การท่องเที่ยวแบบคู่รักถือเป็นส่วนแบ่งที่สำคัญในตลาดการพักผ่อนหย่อนใจระดับโลก การศึกษาครั้งนี้ศึกษาปัจจัยที่มีอิทธิพลต่อความตั้งใจในการแนะนำของนักท่องเที่ยวแบบคู่รักที่ไปเยี่ยมชมรีสอร์ทขนาดเล็กในจุดหมายปลายทางที่ห่างไกล โดยเน้นที่บทบาทของความใกล้ชิดในความสัมพันธ์ของคู่รัก โดยใช้ทฤษฎีพฤติกรรมที่วางแผนไว้ และหลักการ “การรวมผู้อื่นไว้ในตนเอง” ผ่านแบบจำลองที่ทัศนคติ อิทธิพลทางสังคมภายนอก และการรับรู้การควบคุมพฤติกรรมสามารถทำนายความตั้งใจในการแนะนำ ข้อมูลจากนักท่องเที่ยวแบบคู่รัก โดยได้ทำการเก็บข้อมูลจากตัวอย่างจำนวน 284 คน วิเคราะห์โดยใช้แบบจำลอง PLS-SEM ผลการศึกษาพบว่า อิทธิพลทางสังคมภายนอกและการรับรู้การควบคุมพฤติกรรมสามารถทำนายความตั้งใจในการแนะนำมีความสำพันธ์เชิงบวก และความใกล้ชิดในความสัมพันธ์และความตั้งใจในการแนะนำมีความสัมพันธ์เชิงลบ ผลการวิจัยเหล่านี้เน้นย้ำถึงความเชื่อมโยงกันของประสบการณ์การเดินทางของคู่รักและบทบาทสำคัญของความใกล้ชิดในความสัมพันธ์ในการกำหนดความตั้งใจในการแนะนำ ผลการศึกษาได้กล่าวถึงผลกระทบทางทฤษฎีและทางปฏิบัติสำหรับการวิจัยการท่องเที่ยวและผู้ปฏิบัติงานด้านบริการ

คำสำคัญ: นักท่องเที่ยวแบบคู่รัก ทฤษฎีการวางแผนพฤติกรรม ความใกล้ชิดในความสัมพันธ์ OIS

Abstract

Couple tourism represents a significant share in the global leisure market. This study investigates factors influencing recommendation intentions of coupled tourists visiting small-scale resorts in a remote destination, with an emphasis on the role of couples' relationship closeness. Drawing on the theory of planned behavior (TPB) and the principle of "Inclusion of Other in the Self" (OIS), we proposed a model where attitude, external social influence, perceived behavioral control predict recommendation intention, with relationship closeness moderating these relationships. Data from 284 coupled tourists were collected onsite and analyzed using PLS-SEM. Results suggest that external social influence and perceived behavioral control positively predict recommendation intention, and relationship closeness negatively moderates the relationship between external social influence and recommendation intention. These findings highlight the interconnected nature of couple travel experiences and the significant role of relationship closeness in shaping recommendation intentions. Theoretical and practical implications for tourism research and service practitioners are discussed.

Keywords: Couple Tourists, Theory of Planned Behavior, Relationship Closeness, Inclusion of Other in Self

Introduction

Relationship couples often travel together to strengthen bonds, celebrate special days, or simply escape from everyday lives (Fakfare et al., 2020; Liu & Draper, 2024). Research suggests that traveling together improves relationship well-being (Durko & Petrick, 2016). Couple tourism therefore substantially contributes to economies of destinations worldwide. According to market research estimates, the value of honeymoon tourism alone stands at 121.3 billion US dollars in 2023, and the trend is expected to continue to grow in the years to come (Global Market Insights, 2024).

A couple is defined as consisting of two individuals having a romantic relationship such as lovers, married or dating spouses (Coelho et al., 2018). Traveling couples share not only the travel but also their romantic relationship. Imagine: when you travel with your better half, seeing them smiling and having a good time with the attractions, you will very likely share their joy. This connectedness, in many occasions, is the ultimate goal of planning the joint trip in the first place because the existence of romantic companions throughout the travel journey enhances the social aspect of the travel experience, and makes it more memorable (Hamilton et al., 2021).

Existing research often focuses on individual perceptions, and only a few explored the couple dynamics and the potential impact of couple relationships in the shared experiences (Su et al., 2020). Along the tourists' journey map, tourists interact with many counterparts, tour guides, residents, frontline staff, and fellow travelers every now and then. Still, the interaction with the traveling partner can be as much as 24/7. Therefore, the relationship attributes such as relationship closeness in shaping the tourism experience cannot be overlooked.

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) with its satisfactory explaining power, generalizability, and contextualizable nature, has been a well-applied theory in many domains including tourism. While the TPB's validity and predictive power have been well-exploited in predicting tourists' behavioral intentions, a notable gap exists in the literature regarding the specific context of couple tourism. In the context of couple tourism, the attributes of couples' relationship, according to the social influence theory and interdependence theory, could be incorporated into the TPB framework. This research seeks to address this gap by integrating the concept of relationship closeness into the TPB framework.

Therefore, this study constructs an explanatory model based on the theoretical premise of TPB, with the extension of couple relationship closeness, and attempts to investigate the mechanism of the relationship closeness in shaping tourists' recommendation intention. The research attempts to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How do attitude, external social influence, and perceived behavioral control affect couple tourists recommending intention?

RQ2: Does couples' relationship closeness moderate the influence of these factors on their recommendation intention? If so, how?

To answer the above questions, a cross-sectional design with a sample of 284 effective responses was conducted. Empirical results of the PLS-SEM model suggest the moderating effect of relationship closeness on couple members' external social influence exists. The findings of this research provide valuable insights into understanding the influence of relationship attributes in tourists' loyalty behavior. Meantime, the results provide practical implications for marketing, operational, and experience design avenues for service providers targeting coupled tourists.

Literature Review

Couple Tourism

Couple tourism, as a niche form of family travel, is often seen as "purposive" leisure activities where couples plan and travel to spend time together and foster togetherness (Shahvali et al., 2021). Besides the instrumental purposes of strengthening bonds or celebrating meaningful milestones of their relationship (Fakfare et al., 2020), couples traveling together has become a common practice to escape daily routines and seek new experiences (Liu & Draper, 2024), such as adventure travels for couples, empty-nester travels (Dong et al., 2022), and romantic weekend escapes. Couple tourism has a profound economic contribution to societies globally (Schänzel & Yeoman, 2015). In terms of market size, people who travel with companions account for a much bigger market share than solo travelers in the global leisure market. For example, honeymoon tourism alone valued 121.3 billion US dollars in 2023 and is expected to grow by 6.1% annually in the next decade *(Global Market Insights, 2024).* It is therefore of great interest for both the service industry and acidemias to investigate behavioral factors driving couple tourism experience while considering the impact of their relationship.

Research on how tourists' experience accumulates into loyalty behaviors has been well documented. These studies show that positive experiences correlate to tourists' overall satisfaction, which increases intentions to revisit a destination, repeat purchases, and recommend to others. Practically, the intention to recommend has been an important business objective. This is especially so in the digital era, where photos and posts from friends on social media can be a powerful marketing weapon leading to more effective reach-outs. For coupled tourists, a memorable experience can be a function of various factors including their relationship. Previous tourist behavior research focuses on the individual mechanism of decision-making. E.g. major constructs such as satisfaction, past experience, and destination image, are all based on individual interpretations. In other words, an individual's perceptions and affections (i.e. attitude) influence their behavioral outcome. A few researchers examined the relationship quality and argued that it is the companions that make the

tourism experience memorable. Relationship Closeness has a role to play in the process of tourists' experience and behavioral outcomes. It is therefore necessary to consider the relationship and its impact on couple tourists' decision-making, especially the evaluations and subsequent loyalty behaviors such as intention to recommend.

Theory of Planned Behavior

Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is a widely recognized psychological theory. The theory posits that an individual's behavioral intention is determined by three factors: attitude regarding the target behavior, social influence termed subjective norms and perceived control of the target behavior. The model has been supported across various domains in predicting human behaviors, demonstrating its robustness and applicability (Armitage & Conner, 2001). In the field of tourism research, TPB has been extensively adopted to provide a comprehensive framework to understand and predict tourist behaviors, such as tourists' revisit intention and word-of-mouth recommendations (Ulker-Demirel & Ciftci, 2020). Considering TPB's satisfactory explaining power in predicting tourists' behavior, this study chooses TPB as the theoretical premise to investigate coupled tourists' recommendation intention. In this research, Recommendation Intention refers to tourists' willingness to recommend the hotel they experienced to others.

Attitude is defined as individuals' positive or negative evaluations of the behavior in question. According to TPB, Attitude predicts behavioral intentions, and this has been supported by abundant empirical evidence from various contexts (Ajitha & Sivakumar, 2017; Fischer & Karl, 2022; McLaughlin et al., 2020). In the context of tourism, Attitude could involve the overall satisfaction with a destination and perceived value. Previous literature supported Attitude's decisive role in shaping tourists' decision-making: Whether or not to visit a destination or recommend halal tourism (Mohammed et al., 2023; Vesci & Botti, 2019).

Ajzen's (1991) Subjective Norm (SN) refers to individuals' perceptions regarding "significant others" opinions about the target behavior. The effect of SN on recommendation intention is context sensitive. For example, in Lam and Hsu's studies of Chinese tourists' intention to visit Hong Kong (Lam & Hsu, 2004, 2006), among the two samples from the mainland and Taiwan, SN was the strongest predictor for tourists from Taiwan, but not for mainland tourists. More recently, researchers reported SN as the strongest predictor for tourists' visit intention (Boley et al., 2018; Hsu & Huang, 2012; Juschten et al., 2019).

In today's digital era, the importance of SN has become more evident. Especially with the social media propensity in society, user-generated content, influencers, or Instagram friends are among the most accessible and influential referent groups for today's tourists (Vrontis et al., 2021). For coupled tourists, these social referents are external to their romantic relationship, i.e., do not include the influence of their relationship partners.

Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC) refers to individuals' perceptions of ease or difficulty in performing the target behavior. In the context of tourism, this may include tourists' perception and evaluation of time, cost, and convenience. Prior research supported PBC's predicting ability to behavioral intentions, such as green purchases (Paul et al., 2016), staying in green hotels (Han & Kim, 2010), and revisiting environmental destinations (Wang & Zhang, 2020). We postulate:

H1. Attitude positively influences coupled tourists' recommendation intention.

H2: External social influence positively influences coupled tourist's recommendation intention.

H3: Perceived behavioral control positively influences coupled tourists' recommendation intention.

Relationship Closeness

Relationship Closeness is conceptualized as the degree of interdependence and emotional connection between individuals. It encompasses how much relationship partners share their lives, support each other, and feel a sense of "we" (Berscheid et al., 1989). Previous research suggested that couple members' relationship partners as well as the relationship attributes influence individuals' tourism experience (Kang & Hsu, 2005; Kozak & Duman, 2012; Rojas-de-Gracia & Alarcón-Urbistondo, 2019, 2020). For example, in a study of 371 cohabitating couples, researchers found that participants reporting no conflicts and jointly made decisions were the most satisfied tourists (Rojas-de-Gracia & Alarcón-Urbistondo, 2019). In a later study with a mixed-method design, Rojas-de-Gracia & Alarcón-Urbistondo (2020) found that partners' satisfaction with the tourism experience impacted participants' own satisfaction. These findings imply that relationship dynamics play a role in the experience evaluation process.

However, the exact mechanism of how relationship closeness takes effect in the post-experience decision-making process is unclear. Stemming from the Self-Expansion Theory and principle of Inclusion of Other in Self (A. Aron & E. N. Aron, 1986), we expect that relationship closeness moderates the impacts of Attitude, external SN, and PBC on coupled tourists' Recommendation Intention because traveling itself is a self-expansion activity, and as the relationship gets closer, the "we-ness" blurs the boundary between "me" and "us". In this vein, your satisfaction is included in our Attitude, your friends and reference groups become sources of our social influence, and your perceived control strengthens our confidence. Specifically, we anticipate:

H4: Relationship Closeness changes the relationship between Attitudes and Recommendation Intention

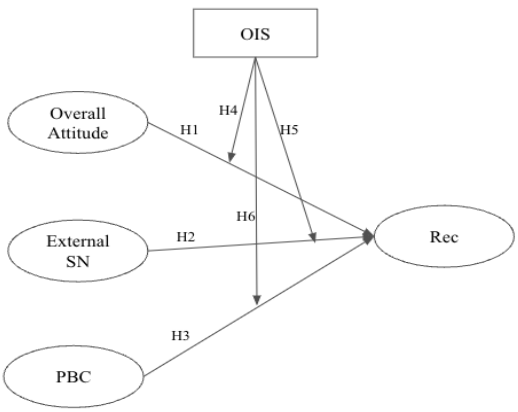
H5: Relationship Closeness changes the relationship between SN and Recommendation Intention

H6: Relationship Closeness changes the relationship between PBC and Recommendation Intention

In summary, this research proposes the conceptual model to predict coupled tourists' Recommendation Intention (See Figure 1). The model is built on the premise of TPB, where tourists' Attitude (H1), External SN (H2), and PBC (H3) jointly predict their recommendation intention. Underpinning the Self-Expansion Theory, we extend the TPB by examining the moderating effect of OIS on the relationships between the TPB mechanism (H4, 5, 6).

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Research Methodology

Our goal is to investigate the TPB constructs' impact (Attitude, External SN, and PBC) on Recommending Intention. We also postulated that the relationship closeness (as denoted in OIS) moderates these relationships.

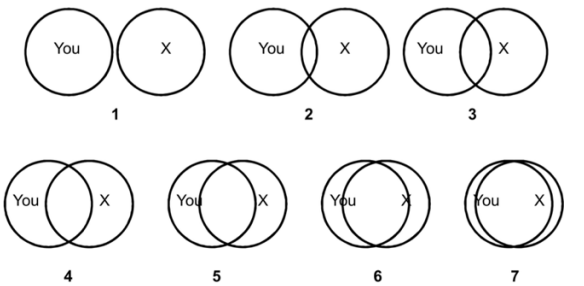
Measurement

Key constructs of TPB are measured with scales adapted from prior research (Juschten et al., 2019; Lam & Hsu, 2006; Quintal et al., 2015), with 7-point Likert scales. In measuring the External social influence, we adapted the prior scale of Subjective Norms by instructing respondents that the social referents should not include their relationship partners. This is because prior research packed multiple accessible sources of social influences into subjective norms, for example, the "significant others" might be from family and relatives, friends, or travel agents (Hsu et al., 2006). Relationship Closeness is measured by a set of graphic representations where respondents were asked to indicate how they perceived the inclusion of their relationship partner in their self-concept (Aron et al., 1992). Aron et al.

(1992) suggested that through close relationships, individuals are inherently motivated to expand their self-concept by incorporating their partner's identities, resources, experiences, and perspectives. The self-expansion theory and Inclusion of Others in Self (IOS) thus imply that as the closeness of a relationship increases, there will be a greater inclusion of the other in the self. As a result, IOS is often used as a tool to measure relationship closeness. As seen in Figure 2, higher scores indicate closer inclusion of the partner in respondents' self-concept, in other words, a closer relationship. Finally, Recommendation intention was measured with three items on a seven-point Likert scale. E.g. "I will recommend this hotel to others" Strongly Disagree (1), Strongly Agree (7). Finally, the questionnaire included demographic questions.

Figure 2

Inclusion of Others in Self Scale



Note: Aron et al. (1992)

We collected data at three small-scale resorts in Doi Mae Salong in northern Thailand. Doi Mae Salong is a mountainous town in the northern tip of Thailand, drawing tourists with its picturesque views, Yunnanese culture, and temperate climate. Most hospitality service providers here are small-scale and independent local brands. Data collection occurred between November 2022 to February 2023, after approval from the service providers and the Human Research Committee of Mae Fah Luang University.

Two trained research assistants intercepted hotel guests at the breakfast venues in the morning, inviting them to participate in the survey with fresh memories of their experience with the resort (Quintal et al., 2015). The questionnaires were pre-loaded in Google Forms and participants scanned a QR code to access the questionnaire and provided responses via their cellphones. Screening questions were set to ensure respondents were in a romantic relationship and traveling with their partners. A total of 304 responses were collected. After eliminating incomplete and non-romantic relationship responses screened, a total of 284 effective responses were used in this study.

Analysis Procedures

We used two software for the data analysis in this research. Descriptive analysis was calculated in R and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was performed in Smart-PLS. Smart-PLS is particularly useful for smaller samples and when data lacks normal distribution (Hair et al., 2019). The significant level of 0.05 were used for inferential analysis and hypothesis tests.

Sample

Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of our sample. Of the 284 participants, age, gender, education level, and the hotel they stayed in were incorporated as control variables. As our study population is vacationing couples, the gender distribution is even across males and females. Note that although most of the sample is from heterosexual couples (n = 250), 34 responses are from same-sex couples.

Table 1

Sample Characteristics

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	142	50%
Female	142	50%
Age		
18-20	7	2.46%
21-30	16	5.63%
31-40	91	32.04%
41-50	113	39.79%
51-60	53	18.66%
61 and Above	4	1.41%
Education		
High School or Lower	21	7.39%
College Diploma	43	15.14%
Bachelor's Degree	157	55.28%
Master's Degree	49	17.25%
PhD or Higher	14	4.93%

Note. n = 284

Source: Author

Results

Descriptive Analysis

As illustrated in Table 2, generally the sample evaluated their experience higher than average. Such higher ratings of experience evaluation aligned with prior reports. In terms of relationship closeness, most respondents reported high inclusion of their relationship partner in their self-concept.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics

Key Constructs	Mean	Std. Deviation
Attitude	5.75	1.51
External Social Influence	5.7	1.4
Perceived Control	5.21	1.78
Recommendation Intention	5.87	1.37
OIS	5.55	1.61

Note. n=284

Source: Author

Reliability and Validity

We followed Hair et al.'s (2011) criteria for PLS-SEM and reviewed internal consistency reliability, indicator reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. As shown in Table 3, except for OIS, which is a single-item construct, all other key constructs demonstrated good reliability and validity, surpassing the criteria thresholds recommended by Hair et al. In addition, the outer loadings surpassed 0.7, suggesting the measurement items contribute to the respective factors. Henseler et al. (2015) recommended HTMT as a better criterion in assessing discriminant validity. By their criterion threshold of 0.9, discriminant validity was established for all our key constructs, as the HTMT of any two constructs were far below the threshold of 0.9. See Table 4.

Table 3

Construct Validity and Reliability

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Attitude	0.921	0.924	0.950	0.863
External Social Influence	0.952	0.954	0.965	0.874
Perceived Control	0.916	0.919	0.947	0.857
Recommendation Intention	0.965	0.966	0.977	0.934
OIS		1		

Note. OIS was a single-item construct.

Source: Author

Table 4

HTMT Criterion for Discriminant Validity

Attitude	Edu	External SN	Gender	OIS	OIS*SN	PC	Rec	Age	Income
Attitude									
Edu	0.03								
External SN	0.62	0.08							
Gender	0.04	0.03	0.06						
OIS	0.21	0.01	0.19	0.05					
OIS*SN	0.22	0.02	0.27	0.02	0.17				
PC	0.47	0.16	0.57	0.10	0.17	0.13			
Rec	0.53	0.03	0.76	0.08	0.19	0.32	0.55		
Age	0.04	0.04	0.02	0.14	0.04	0.13	0.04	0.03	
Income	0.01	0.34	0.03	0.10	0.01	0.08	0.06	0.02	0.34

Structural Model

PL_S-SEM is confirmed by predictability (indicated by R2) and reliability and validity metrics (Hair, 2017). Unlike traditional covariance-based SEM, PLS does not emphasize on goodness-of-fit indexes. However, our Smart PLS report suggested an acceptable model fit. The SRMR for both saturated and estimated models is 0.35, below the 0.08 threshold. Additionally, the NFI for the saturated model is 0.90 and 0.91 for the estimated model, suggesting a satisfactory model fit.

Regarding predictability, R2 for Recommendation Intention stands at 0.58, and R2 Adjusted is 0.57. The model accounts for 57% of the variance in Recommendation Intention. The f2 effect size analysis determines the contribution of each predictor variable to the R2 of the endogenous variable. For our model, External SN 0.4172 contributes a large effect in explaining Recommendation Intention with an f2 of 0.417. Perceived control and the interaction term of OIS and External SN contributed small effects (f2 = 0.043 and 0.031 respectively).

Table 5

PLS-SEM Results

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values
Attitude -> Rec	0.064	0.065	0.078	0.823	0.411
External SN -> Rec	0.572	0.572	0.073	7.829	0.000
PBC -> Rec	0.166	0.168	0.048	3.424	0.001
OIS -> Rec	0.015	0.014	0.040	0.377	0.706
OIS*ESN -> Rec	-0.044	-0.043	0.022	1.973	0.049
Age -> Rec	0.058	0.056	0.043	1.345	0.179
Edu -> Rec	0.034	0.034	0.042	0.805	0.421
Gender -> Rec	0.032	0.033	0.043	0.746	0.456
Income -> Rec	-0.066	-0.066	0.045	1.468	0.142

Source: Author

Table 5 reports the path coefficients. External SN significantly and positively influences Recommendation Intention (t-statistic 7.829, p-value 0.000). Perceived Control significantly and positively influences Recommendation Intention (t-statistic 3.424, p-value 0.001). However, the relationship between Attitude and Recommendation Intention (t-statistic 0.823, p-value 0.411) is not significant. The interaction term of OIS and External SN is significant and negative (t-statistic 1.973, p-value 0.049). The control variables of Age, Education level, Gender, and Income showed no significant bearings with Recommendation Intention. These results imply that the more social influence one perceives regarding the hotel, the more likely one will recommend it to others. Similarly, the more control one has in visiting the hotel, the more likely one will recommend the hotel to others. The moderating effect of Relationship closeness significantly and negatively moderates the relationship between external SN and Recommendation intention. As visitors perceive their

romantic relationship with their partner to be closer, the impact of Social Influence on Recommendation Intention weakens. With the above results, we summarize the hypothesis testing results in Table 6.

Table 6

Hypotheses Testing Results

Hypotheses	Results
H1. Attitude positively influences coupled tourists' recommendation intention.	Rejected
H2. External SN positively influences coupled tourists' recommendation intention	Supported
H3. PBC positively influences coupled tourists' recommendation intention	Supported
H4. OIS moderates the relationship between Attitudes and Recommendation Intention	Rejected
H5. OIS moderates the relationship between External SN and Recommendation Intention	Supported
H6. OIS moderates the relationship between PBC and Recommendation Intention	Rejected

Source: Author

Discussion

Built on the general framework of TPB, this research investigated the factors influencing coupled tourists' recommendation intention regarding small-scale resorts in a remote destination. Our study specifically focused on the role of relationship closeness in the process. PLS-SEM results strengthened our understanding of the research questions. Specifically, H2, H3, and H5 were supported, largely confirming TPB's efficacy in predicting coupled tourists' recommending intention, while H1, H4, and H6 were rejected. We now discuss the main findings and implications theoretically and practically.

Our analysis suggests that coupled tourists' recommendation intention is significantly and positively influenced by SN (in our context, external SN) and PBC, but not Attitude. This indicates that couple tourists' intention to generate positive word-of-mouth depends on social influence and perceived control. In other words, the more positive word-of-mouth they hear from their social referents, from friends, non-spousal family relatives, or social media exposure, the more likely they will recommend the resort. Similarly, their recommendation is also predicted by how much control they have. This could be the resources in time, money,

and ease to access to the resort. The more manageable they perceive these resources, the more likely they will recommend the resort to others. As TPB is a context-specific theory, the results often vary. The result of our study partially aligns with recent TPB applications in tourism research where the SN and PBC significantly and positively influenced intention (Han & Kim, 2010; Manosuthi et al., 2020; Meng & Cui, 2020; Vesci & Botti, 2019).

Contradicting prior research, our model analysis suggests that Attitude does not significantly predict recommendation intention (t-statistic 0.823, p-value 0.411). This indicates that couple tourists' liking of the resort does not result in their recommendation intentions. One possible explanation could be the unique context of couple travel. As couples travel together, their experiences are inherently intertwined. Couple members' individual preferences may become less pronounced in the face of shared experiences because of the motivation to maintain harmony and avoid conflicts with their partners. In other words, the connectedness of their "common fate", i.e., sharing the same experience, might overshadow individual attitudes. It is possible that couples prioritize their shared preferences and common goals for the trip, leading to a less direct link between their individual attitude and the recommendation intention.

Interestingly, our findings reveal a negative moderation effect of relationship closeness between the external social influence and recommendation intention (H5, beta -0.044, t-statistic 1.973, p-value 0.049). The significant negative moderation effect suggests that as couples feel closer and more connected, their reliance on external opinions diminishes. Prior research pointed out the importance of relationship partners and the harmonious relationship in shaping tourists' satisfaction (Kang & Hsu, 2005; Kozak & Duman, 2012; Rojas-de-Gracia & Alarcón-Urbistondo, 2019, 2020), our findings moved a step further by underscoring how relationship closeness take effect in the decision-making process. Specifically, the closer couple tourists see their relationship reduces the effect of external social influence on their intention to recommend.

Vacationing products heavily rely on social influence. As the nature of intangibility, tourists can only evaluate the product after their experience, or by actively searching for information. The information provided by their social circles, often through social media, is deemed as more authentic because of the relational trust (Pop et al., 2022). However, for couple members, the power of social influence outside their relationship reduces as their romantic relationship is perceived closer. Couples perceiving their relationship closer cultivate a high level of "we-ness", forming their "inner-circle", and their shared experiences and bond provide each other the primary social influence (Minda Oriña et al., 2002; Oriña et al., 2008). In other words, influence from the inner circle might compete with that from the outer circle. This echoes with A. Aron and E. N. Aron (1986) concept of "inclusion of other in the self", which posits that close relationship partners become integral to each other's self-concept, resulting in a we-ness, where relationship partners' preference carries more weight than the outsiders' opinion.

Contributions and Implications

Our study contributes to the tourism research in the following three aspects.

Firstly, this research is among the first to incorporate relationship theories in studying coupled tourist behaviors. We extended the individual-based theory of planned behavior with the relationship dimension of OIS. Specifically, the principle of "inclusion of other in the self" in describing relationship closeness provided explanation in how coupled tourists process external social influences in evaluating their travel experience, and our empirical results indicate that couple unity and their inner-circle influence compete with external social influences from outsider reference groups, which weakens as the romantic relationship is perceived closer. Although previous studies implied that relationship quality is an important factor influencing tourists perceived satisfaction, our study empirically revealed the underlying mechanism with the negative moderating effect of relationship closeness. Specifically, relationship closeness does not directly influence tourists' loyalty behavior but negatively moderates the influence of external SN.

Secondly, our research enriched our understanding of couple tourists' relationship and its role in shaping their post-purchase decision-making. We provided empirical evidence with a specific context of coupled tourists. Our model analysis results not only added another evidence in TPB's applicability, but we also separated the construct of SN by two sources: the internal and external. And our results suggest that although external SN still an important predictor of tourists' recommendation intention, the internal, i.e. influence from their relationship partner, may reduce the impact of external SN.

Thirdly, our research contributes for practitioners and couple tourists. Service providers can use our results in their marketing and customer experience design. The fact that external SN and PBC significantly influences coupled tourists' recommendation intention confirms the importance of social media and content dissemination. Businesses may render their offerings pertinent to impress couples, for example, emphasize the romantic characteristics of the destination, theme decoration or couple adventure activities. Service providers are also advised to enhance shared experiences through artifacts in their service packages for their coupled guests, for example, incentivize couples to share their romantic experience on their social media by creating visible messages, deco, or photo-worthy settings, to allow couple guests reinforce each other's experiences during their stay.

For couple tourists, increasing awareness of the "we-ness" while traveling together is the paramount objective of their joint travel. Thus, in the decision-making, through adequate communication not only reduces possible conflicts and enhances relationship, as shown in our results, also contributes to their joint appreciation of the journey together.

Limitations and Future Research

Studying couple's dyadic experience is subject to multiple factors. Such complication warrants that our research cannot go without limitations. Firstly, couples consist of two unique individuals, although they share their vacation experiences, they each might have different needs and wants. Investigating couples as groups might reveal more nuances at both individual and group levels. Methodologically, future research might utilize dyadic data analysis (Kenny et al., 2006) to study data from both members controlled in one unit. Our model only considered the general behavioral prediction framework of TPB, and the construct of attitude did not have significant influence in the recommendation intention. Attitude is a general concept including multiple expectancy-disconfirmation aspects; thus, future studies can incorporate relationship characteristics of couples into other models in tourist study. For example, whether romantic relationship changes couple tourists' perceptions of destination image, authenticity, or emotional attachment with the destination.

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