

## **PRO-POOR TOURISM: DOES TOURISM INCOME DISTRIBUTION MATTER TO TOURISTS?**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Due to tourism's potential for poverty alleviation and inclusive growth (Adu-Ampong, 2019; Cárdenas-García et al., 2015; Denman, 2004), pro-poor tourism was introduced. It aims to create net benefits for the poor and to ensure that tourism growth contributes to poverty alleviation; thus, one of its principles is to distribute the benefits locally (Ashley & Roe, 2002; Butler et al., 2013). Among all the benefits, local communities consider economic benefits the most important (Puczko & Ratz, 2000) and can be divided into three categories: direct, indirect, and induced (Ashley & Mitchell, 2009; Sugiyarto et al., 2003). This study focuses on the direct economic impact of tourism development, which comes from the tourists' consumption of tourism products and services at destinations and can be transferred into the direct income for tourism companies and practitioners (Lejárraga & Walkenhorst, 2010). Tourism income distribution (hereafter TID) is defined as sharing income generated by the tourism and hospitality industry among different groups in a given area during a given period (Soylu et al., 2021). It usually involves three key stakeholder groups: local government, investment companies (usually non-local), and local communities (Asmit et al., 2020; Zeng et al., 2015).

However, the impact of TID on tourists has not been fully discussed. In tourism and hospitality research, visit intention (hereafter VI) and willingness to pay (hereafter WTP) are two frequently discussed topics of tourists' behavioral intentions (Chen et al., 2014). VI is closely related to the travel behavior (Um & Crompton, 1992). Although the gap exists between VI and the actual travel behavior (Hsu & Huang, 2010), tourists' VI is still considered an important variable for measuring the potential tourism markets (Chow & Murphy, 2011). Meanwhile, WTP is commonly used to value goods or services based on the assumptions of utility maximization and rational choice (Reynisdottir et al., 2008). Most research on tourists' WTP has been conducted in the context of ecotourism, which found that most tourists are willing to pay for the protection of wildlife and other natural resources (Birdir et al., 2013; Faizan et al., 2016; Murphy et al., 2018). Despite the growing importance of pro-poor tourism, to our knowledge, only one paper has evaluated the WTP for pro-poor tourism products (Li et al., 2022) and indicated that TID might affect tourists' WTP. However, Li et al. (2022) did not elaborate on the different influences of different TIDs on tourists' behavioral intentions.

In addition, tourists' trust in destinations has caught increasing attention in academic research and practices (Artigas et al., 2017; Lim & Rasul, 2022). Trust involves one's expectations of others that are generated from honest, regular, and cooperative behaviors (Fukuyama, 1996) and thus have the potential to handle risk or uncertainty in their exchange relationships (Rousseau et al., 1998). In this study, tourists' trust is defined as a subjective belief or an expected quality that the subjects of the TID will promote the benefits of local communities in an exchange situation.

This empirical study aims to explore one research question: how do different TIDs influence tourists' behavioral intentions in the context of pro-poor tourism? This paper employs a quantitative approach to reveal the intriguing relationships between different TIDs and tourists' VI and WTP. This paper can contribute to promoting the equality of TID among local governments, investment companies, and local communities in developing countries or areas

from a new perspective.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

### Tourism income distributions (TIDs)

The understanding of the relationship between tourism and poverty alleviation has been evolving since the 1950s and is still under discussion (Scheyvens, 2007). According to the existing research, three main types of TIDs exist in developing areas, namely, capital-dominant, government-dominant, and community-dominant.

*Capital-dominant TID.* According to the idea of "liberalism" or "neoliberalism," trickle-down development has been popular since the 1970s. It assumes that a free market can automatically trickle the benefit of economic growth down to all social classes, including the poor (Scheyvens, 2007; Schilcher, 2007). Perhaps some imperfections in the early stages of capital accumulation in this market may exacerbate income inequality. Still, when the rate of capital accumulation is high enough, the wealth gap will eventually narrow (Aghion & Bolton, 1997). Under the trickle-down development mode, tourism development is usually capital-driven, and tourism income is distributed to local communities through market mechanisms with little external intervention. On the one hand, tourism investment companies make a particular contribution to poverty alleviation in developing areas because they are usually labor-intensive and employ female, young, or less-skilled individuals, who make up a large proportion of the poor (Scheyvens, 2007; Spenceley & Meyer, 2012). From the perspective of criticism, on the other hand, tourism development in developing areas primarily relies on external investments. External investment companies are criticized for not increasing the income of local communities and, worse, causing the loss of their livelihoods and reducing their well-being (Jeyacheya & Hampton, 2020).

*Government-dominant TID.* In recent years, local governments in developing areas have realized the limitations of trickle-down development and have taken more responsibility in selecting tourism investment companies to reduce the negative impacts on local communities. However, governments are not always the public benefit maximizer but the self-interest maximizer (Tan, 2021). As corruption will exacerbate income inequality and poverty (Gupta et al., 2002), even in government-dominant TID, local communities may still struggle to benefit economically from tourism development.

*Community-dominant TID.* With the development of alternative approaches, tourism researchers are shifting their focus to community-based tourism, involving the rights and equality of local communities (Iflazoglu & Can, 2021; Lapeyre, 2010; Phommavong & Sörensson, 2014). The theoretical development of community-based tourism is gradually influencing the practice of TID, though community-dominant TID is still rarely seen in current practices. For instance, in an ethnic minority village in China, with the help of a university research team, the local community set up their village-owned company and developed their village into a rural tourist attraction. In this way, the local community could directly receive a 70% share of tourism profits (Bao & Yang, 2022). Under the community-dominant TID, local communities significantly benefit from tourism development.

### Visit intention (VI)

VI is defined as tourists' expectation or anticipation of a future travel to a destination or place (Lam & Hsu, 2004). Intention can be conditional and unconditional (Khan et al., 2017). The former means that whether individuals will act depends on internal and external conditions, even if they have relevant abilities and opportunities; the latter means that they will act once they get the abilities and opportunities (Ferrero, 2009). Most intentions are conditional and restrictive (Khan et al., 2017), including VI. The previous study showed that personal values

influence customers' intention to visit green hotels. Specifically, customers with high altruistic values tend to be more concerned about environmental issues and are thus more likely to visit green hotels (Verma et al., 2019). Similarly, in the context of pro-poor tourism, different TIDs may be related to ethical concerns, which may influence tourists' VI. Based on the above, we proposed the following:

**H1.** In the context of pro-poor tourism, tourists' VI varies across different TIDs.

### **Willingness to pay (WTP)**

WTP refers to the maximum price a customer is willing to pay for a certain number of products or services (Harapan et al., 2020; Le Gall-Ely, 2009). The determinants of WTP are not only the economic value and objective utility of the product but also the customer's subjective assessment of the product's utility (Carlsson & Johansson-Stenman, 2000; Garrod & Fyall, 2000; Kyle et al., 2005; Reynisdottir et al., 2008). Previous research has demonstrated that ethical or moral motivations are a robust antecedent of consumers' WTP (McGoldrick & Freestone, 2008; Park, 2018). For instance, Wang et al. (2021) found that ethical attribute was the primary motivation for Chinese consumers to purchase apples from developing areas with an average 31% premium. In the context of pro-poor tourism, TIDs may involve ethical issues affecting tourists' WTP. Specifically, a survey in Malaysia found that tourists were willing to increase the benefits of local communities in tourist destinations by purchasing products or services from local people (Bhuiyan et al., 2014). In addition, when tourists realize that a portion of their payment will be distributed directly to the poor, they are likely to pay more (Li et al., 2022). Therefore, under different TIDs, tourists may perceive different local benefits of tourism development, thereby influencing their WTP. Based on the above, we proposed the following:

**H2.** In the context of pro-poor tourism, tourists' WTP varies across different TIDs.

### **Mediation effects of trust**

Trust has recently been defined as a state of mind and confidence that an exchange partner will perform (Nguyen & Rose, 2009). Previous research demonstrates that tourists' trust in destination management can influence potential tourists' decision-making behaviors (Eitzinger & Wiedemann, 2008). In medical tourism, for instance, destination trust is related to behavioral intentions. Specifically, trust has been found to increase tourists' VI (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016). Thus, different TIDs may influence tourists' trust, thereby influencing tourists' VI and WTP in the context of pro-poor tourism. Based on the above, we proposed the following:

**H3.** In the context of pro-poor tourism, the relationship between TID and VI is mediated by trust.

**H4.** In the context of pro-poor tourism, the relationship between TID and WTP is mediated by trust.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of this study.

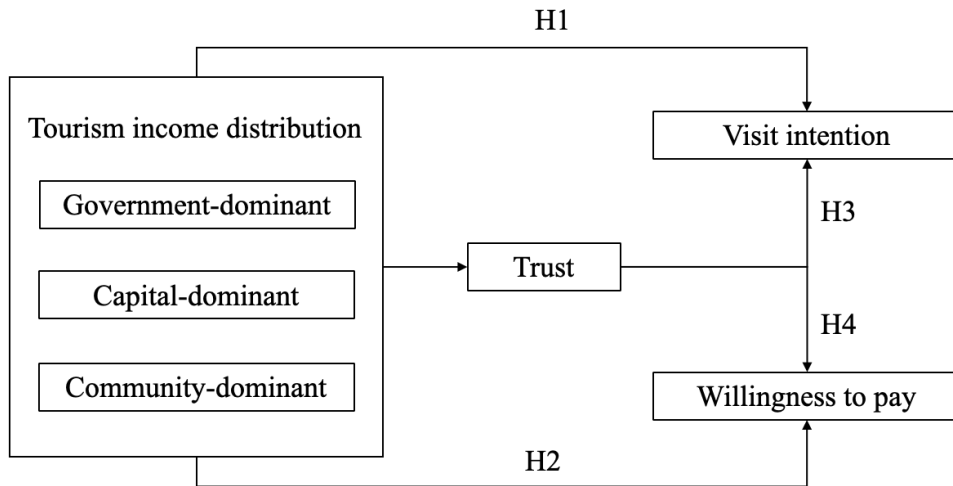


Figure 1. The Conceptual Model of This Study

### METHOD

The current study tested the direct impacts of TID on tourists' VI (H1) and WTP (H2) and examined the mediation effects of trust between TID and tourists' VI (H3) and between TID and tourists' WTP (H4). According to the literature, experimental scenarios featured three modes of TIDs: government-dominant, capital-dominant, and community-dominant TIDs. Meanwhile, this study took paying entrance fees to the destination in a developing area as an example of WTP. It simulated a rural tourist destination in southeastern China where tourists need to purchase tickets to visit. Three scenarios were developed to describe different TIDs (see Table 1).

Table 1. Three Scenario Descriptions of TIDs

TID	Scenarios
Government-dominant	A village has been developed as a rural tourist destination by the local government. If you want to visit the village, you need to purchase a ticket. The ticket revenue will be distributed by the local government and used for public investment.
Capital-dominant	A village has been developed as a rural tourist destination by an investment company. If you want to visit the village, you need to purchase a ticket. The ticket revenue will be distributed by the company and used for its operations.
Community-dominant	A village has been developed as a rural tourist destination by the local community. If you want to visit the village, you need to purchase a ticket. The ticket revenue will be distributed by the local community and used for community development.

To enhance external validity, we included as participants only those tourists who had participated in rural tourism activities within the past five years. In the context of pro-poor

tourism, some extrinsic factors are likely to influence their WTP, such as income, educational level, age, and gender (Jehan et al., 2021; Scheepers & Grotenhuis, 2005; Willer et al., 2015). Thus, this paper treated demographic characteristics and previous rural travel experience as control variables in running ANOVA in SPSS Statistics 29 and bootstrapping models in SmartPLS 4.

*Pretest.* The pretest involved 71 participants (43.66 % women;  $M_{age} = 35.39$ ). The manipulation of TID was checked by the questions, "to what extent do you agree that the ticket revenue will be distributed by the local government?" [ $M_{government} = 5.91$ ,  $M_{capital} = 3.67$ ,  $M_{community} = 4.75$ ,  $F(2, 68) = 12.313$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ], "to what extent do you agree that the ticket revenue will be distributed by the external tourism investment company?" [ $M_{government} = 4.43$ ,  $M_{capital} = 5.25$ ,  $M_{community} = 4.00$ ,  $F(2, 68) = 3.605$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ] and "To what extent do you agree that the ticket revenue will be distributed by the local community?" [ $M_{government} = 4.65$ ,  $M_{capital} = 3.38$ ,  $M_{community} = 5.04$ ,  $F(2, 68) = 6.320$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ]. One-way ANOVA results proved the effectiveness of the manipulation.

*Design and samples.* We adopted a single-factor (TID: capital-dominant vs. government-dominant vs. community-dominant) between-subject experiment. We randomly assigned participants to one of the three scenarios. After removing invalid responses based on control, attention, and manipulation checks, we finally collected 240 valid samples (Table 2). Adopting a preliminary power analysis (F-test [ANOVA: fixed effects, omnibus, oneway]) with SPSS Statistics 29, the sample size is 66 for an effect size of 0.40 and a statistical power of 0.8 at a 0.05 significance level (Faul et al., 2009). Therefore, the experiment had sufficient validity.

Table 2. Sample Demographics in This Study.

	Frequency	Percent
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	122	50.80%
Female	118	49.20%
Non-binary/third gender	0	0.00%
<b>Education</b>		
Without studies	1	0.40%
Primary	9	3.80%
Secondary	4	1.70%
Undergraduate	57	23.80%
Graduate degree	126	52.50%
Postgraduate degree	43	17.90%
<b>Annual family income (US\$)</b>		
\$20,000 and less	8	3.30%
\$20,001-100,000	107	44.60%
\$100,001-200,000	55	22.90%
\$200,001-300,000	25	10.40%
\$300,001-500,000	34	14.20%
\$500,001 and above	11	4.60%
<b>Age</b>		

Under 21 years old	1	0.40%
21-30	132	55.00%
31-40	70	29.20%
41-50	27	11.30%
51-60	9	3.80%
Above 60 years old	1	0.40%
Marital status		
Single	28	11.70%
Married/living as a couple	212	88.30%
Separated/divorced/widow(er)	0	0.00%

*Procedure and measures.* The questionnaire contained eight sections. First, participants were asked about demographic characteristics, including educational level, current employment status, working industry, family income, age, previous rural tourism frequency, marital status, and gender via a categorical scale. Second, we asked them to imagine they were visiting a rural tourism destination in a developing area by watching a video. To check their attention while watching the video, we asked the participants two questions about the information shown in the video (same as in the Pretest). Third, we randomly allocated one of the three different TID scenarios to participants (same as in the Pretest) and checked the effects of manipulation by the question, "To what extent do you agree ticket revenue is likely to benefit the local community". Fourth, realism to the scenario was checked by the question, "To what extent do you think the above scenarios are real?". Fifth, the measurement of trust in the subjects of TID included four items (Gursoy et al., 2017). Sixth, tourist destination engagement is a second-order construct, including five dimensions: helping other tourists, feedback, cooperation, compliance, and word of mouth. These dimensions were measured by two, two, three, four, and three items, which were adapted from Zhang et al. (2018). Seventh, they were asked to answer five questions to measure their VI. These items were adopted and revised from the research of Su et al. (2014). Last, their WTP was measured by the question, "to what extent are you willing to purchase a ticket to visit the village?" All items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree).

## FINDINGS

*Manipulation and realism check.* In terms of the direct effects, through one-way ANOVA, TID perceived by participants in different scenarios [ $M_{\text{government}} = 5.66$ ,  $M_{\text{capital}} = 5.91$ ,  $M_{\text{community}} = 6.04$ ,  $F(2, 237) = 3.183$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ] is significantly different. Hence, the manipulations in this study were successful. Besides, the realism of the scenario [ $M = 5.88$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ,  $t[238] = 28.83$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ] was confirmed.

*Reliability and validity.* The reliability of constructs was tested with Cronbach's alpha values. The Cronbach's alpha values for trust and VI were 0.748 and 0.840, respectively. All composite reliability values (CR) were above 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978), indicating the reliability of scales. In addition, the validity of constructs was examined using SPSS Statistics 29. The result of KMO and Bartlett's test analysis was 0.863 ( $p < 0.001$ ), higher than 0.5. It indicated a strong validity of the construct in this study.

*Direct effects of TID on VI and WTP.* The direct effect between TID and VI was tested through a bootstrapping model. To evaluate H1, we coded government-dominant TID as 1, capital-dominant TID as 2, and community-dominant TID as 3. Using SmartPLS 4, a 95%

bootstrap confidence interval (CI) was obtained for the parameter estimates with 5000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2017). The result [Path: TID → VI, effect = 0.299, 95%CI = [0.218, 0.399],  $p < 0.001$ ] indicated that tourists' VI significantly varied in different TIDs, thus supporting H1. Similarly, the result [Path: TID → WTP, effect = 0.229, 95%CI = [0.110, 0.334],  $p < 0.001$ ] illustrated that tourists' WTP significantly varied in different TIDs, thus supporting H2.

The results of one-way ANOVA also provide support for H1 and H2 (Table 3). Regarding H1, significance was found at the 0.001 level ( $F = 24.380$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, three groups of different TIDs showed a mean difference in tourists' VI. Tourists in the group of community-dominant TID indicated the highest VI, whereas tourists in the group of government-dominant TID showed the lowest VI. According to Duncan's multiple range test, there are significant mean differences between three participant groups of different TIDs, thus supporting H1. A similar pattern was observed between TID and WTP. Tourists' WTP was significantly higher in the group of community-dominant TID, followed by the groups of capital-dominant and then government-dominant TID, thus supporting H2.

Table 3. Results of One-way ANOVA Test to Examine H1 and H2.

	Government-dominant mode (n=189)	Capital-dominant mode (n=185)	Community-dominant mode (n=187)	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
VI	5.39a	5.72b	5.88c	24.380***	.000
WTP	4.97a	5.35b	5.84c	26.422***	.000

Note: a, b, and c indicate the source of significant mean differences at the 0.001 level ( $a < b < c$ ); \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

*Mediation effects of trust.* Moreover, the mediation effects were tested through a bootstrapping model in SmartPLS 4 (see Fig.2). To assess H3, we coded TIDs as above. Using SmartPLS 4, a 95% bootstrap confidence interval (CI) was obtained for the parameter estimates with 5000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2017). The results of the mediation analysis are shown in Figure 2.

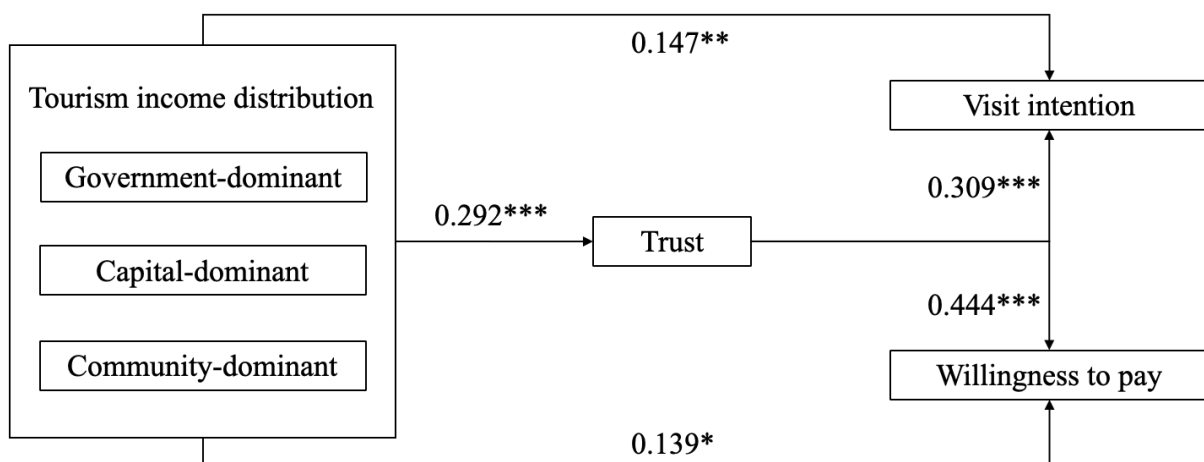


Figure 2. Results of Mediation Analysis to Examine H3 and H4.

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

The results of the bootstrapping model show that trust significantly mediated the relationship between TID and VI ( $\beta = 0.256$ , 95% CI: [0.073, 0.209], excluding 0). After controlling the mediator of trust, the impact of TID and VI is still significant (95% CI: [0.035, 0.249], excluding 0), suggesting trust does not fully mediate the relationship between TID and VI. Thus, H3 is supported. The mediating effect of trust between TID and WTP was also confirmed ( $\beta = 0.140$ , 95% CI: [0.043, 0.154], excluding 0). After controlling the mediator of trust, the impact of TID and WTP is still significant (95% CI: [0.010, 0.252], excluding 0). It is suggested that trust partly mediated the relationship between TID and WTP, which supports H4.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research explored a new relationship between TID and tourists' VI and WTP. The results suggest that in the context of pro-poor tourism, tourists' VI and WTP vary across different income distributions. Specifically, tourists are more likely to visit destinations and more willing to purchase their tickets under a community-dominant TID, followed by capital-dominant and government-dominant modes. Tourists' trust in the subjects of TIDs may explain the different performances of tourists' VI and WTP under different TIDs. For participants, when the local government dominates TID, tourists perceive that the tourism income is less likely to be distributed to local communities, indicating their distrust of the government, which echoes the previous research. A previous study also found that rural Americans generally distrusted the government and thus did not support government intervention (Walsh, 2012). In pro-poor tourism, tourists may have similar concerns that local communities hardly participate in TID when the government dominates it.

This study further examined the indirect effects of TID on tourists' VI and WTP. The results indicate that the relationship between TID on tourists' VI and WTP is mediated by trust, which in turn increases tourists' VI and WTP. In this way, this research offers a new perspective on pro-poor tourism to promote tourists' behavioral intentions. Many tourism scholars have participated in discussing tourists' behavioral intentions, especially for VI and WTP. They recently focused on the ethical attributes of tourists' behavioral intentions and examined the role of environment and heritage protection on tourists' behavior and behavioral intentions (Agag et al., 2020; Atzeni et al., 2022; de Araújo et al., 2022). Compared to environmental and heritage conservation, humanistic care is an explicit form of an ethical attribute. TID directly influences the effect of tourism on poverty alleviation, reflecting the humanistic care for the poor living at tourist destinations. Therefore, we introduced another dimension of ethical attributes, humanistic care, into tourists' behavioral intentions. The findings confirmed the significant influence of TID on tourists' VI and WTP. As such, we provided a new antecedent of tourists' behavioral intentions related to the humanistic concerns of residents——TID——and enhanced the understanding of tourist and pro-poor tourism.

TID is important not only for those who benefit but also for those who provide (i.e., the tourists). In the context of pro-poor tourism, tourist destinations should highly value the equality of TID to promote tourists' VI and WTP. Thus, it is suggested that the government takes action to help local residents, especially the poor locals, to participate in TID. In recent years, the "ticket economy" has been increasingly criticized for reducing tourist access to tourist destinations (Wu et al., 2017). However, this paper shows that in the context of pro-poor tourism, tourists are willing to visit and pay the entrance fees to rural tourist destinations when they trust the subjects of TID. More importantly, their visit intentions will be stronger when TID is mainly distributed to local communities, followed by the capital and then local government. Therefore, to gain the trust of tourists, local governments could promote community-based tourism by empowering local communities to distribute tourism income.



This study has several limitations and leaves room for future research. First, the quantitative data in the current study came primarily from Americans known for their distrust of the government. Cross-cultural research is suggested to examine the possible differences in the impact of TID on tourists across different cultural contexts. Second, this study focused on behavioral engagement, while engagement has multiple dimensions, including cognitive, emotional, and behavioral (Hou & Pan, 2023; Zhang et al., 2018). Subsequent studies should also consider cognitive and emotional dimensions of tourists' engagement intentions at destinations to verify whether such engagement dimensions influence their impact on tourists' VI and WTP. Third, this study tested the influence of TID on tourists' VI and WTP, and different behavioral intentions of tourists should be explored in the future. Last, we conducted scenario-based experiments to test the hypotheses through an online platform. Future research could employ non-hypothetical experiments in actual tourist destinations to increase the external validity of these research findings.

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