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Tourist motivations for choosing platform-mediated free tours: An application of extended planned behaviour theory

Motivaciones turísticas para elegir *free tours* mediados por plataformas: Una aplicación de la teoría del comportamiento planificado ampliada.

Jorge Rivera Garcia[1]

Eneko Ibarnia Caspistegui[2]

Julie Wilson[3]

Pau Obrador[4]

[1] Universitat Oberta de Catalunya https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1868-647X

[2] Universitat Oberta de Catalunya https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4189-2979

[3] Universitat Oberta de Catalunya https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2802-7275

[4] Newcastle Business School https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5619-7074

Resumen

Los free tours mediados por plataformas tienen una gran presencia en las principales ciudades culturales de Europa. Sin embargo, a pesar de su importancia, siguen estando poco explorados en la literatura académica, incluso cuando en algunos casos contribuyen al sobredesarrollo turístico (*overtourism*). Esta investigación analiza las características de este fenómeno turístico investigando las motivaciones de los consumidores y su interacción con este tipo de tours. Para ello, se utiliza un enfoque cuantitativo basado en la teoría del comportamiento planificado (TPB) de Ajzen, ampliamente reconocida por su eficacia en la predicción de diversas intenciones y comportamientos. Se construyó un modelo de ecuaciones estructurales (SEM) para arrojar luz

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sobre los determinantes de la elección de los turistas por los free tours mediados por plataformas. Nuestro modelo ampliado de la TPB incluye la confianza en las plataformas mediante eWOM, los valores de sostenibilidad y los constructos de lealtad en línea. Los resultados ofrecen información valiosa sobre los procesos de toma de decisiones de los turistas y validan la eficacia de la TPB para explicar una proporción significativa de la varianza en las intenciones de compra de free tours basados en plataformas en línea.

Palabras clave: *free tours* mediados por plataformas; teoría del comportamiento planificado; confianza; eWOM; lealtad; turismo sostenible

Abstract

Platform-mediated free tours are highly prominent in major European cultural cities. However, despite their significance, they remain underexplored in academic literature, even though they contribute to overtourism in some cases. This research explores the characteristics of this tourism phenomenon by investigating consumers' motivations and interactions with it. This is accomplished through a quantitative approach using Ajzen's well-established theory of planned behaviour (TPB), which has demonstrated its efficacy in predicting various intentions and behaviours. A structural equation model (SEM) was constructed to shed light on the determinants of tourists' choice of platform-mediated free tours. Our extended TPB model includes trust in the platform eWOM, sustainability values and online loyalty constructs. The results provide insight into tourists' decision-making processes and validate the TPB's efficacy in explaining a substantial portion of the variance in purchase intentions for online platform-based free tours.

Key words: platform-mediated free tour; theory of planned behaviour; trust; eWOM; loyalty; sustainable tourism.

1 Introduction

In recent years, the tourism landscape has been significantly altered by short-term rental platforms, most notably Airbnb (Pastor & Rivera-García, 2020; Priporas et al., 2017). Under the platform economy, short-term rental platforms have diversified into new lucrative ventures, such as platform-mediated free tours (Leal & Medina, 2018; Rivera et al., 2023), a phenomenon that has gained notable prominence in cities with high tourist traffic (García & Ruiz, 2022). This trend globally affects traditional tourism intermediation and reshapes contractual and employment

dynamics, especially involving guides and digital platforms for free tours. In some cities, it is associated with socio-spatial impacts, leading local authorities to address issues like urban overcrowding (Ortega, 2022).

Despite their significance, free tours remain underexplored in the literature (Rivera et al., 2023). There is a lack of research on the extent of tourism activity within the pay-what-you-want framework (Koerts, 2017), the motivations behind choosing these tours over regulated, fixed-price ones led by certified guides, and the resulting socio-spatial impacts. To address this research gap, this paper explores the motivations and behaviours of free tour consumers by developing a new research framework based on the theory of planned behaviour (TPB), a well-established model for predicting a wide range of intentions and actions (Ajzen, 1991; Sun et al., 2022). The aim is to analyse the motivations that drive visitors to choose free tours, beyond the obvious cost benefits. A quantitative approach is used to develop a unique TPB-based structural equation model (SEM) with four additional constructs that may influence behaviour. These additional variables include sustainability values (environmental, economic and social) and trust as antecedents of the TPB variables, and digital platform loyalty as a moderator.

Applying the TPB in this context helps tourism platforms enhance tourists' trust, loyalty, and behavioural intentions, leading to more effective marketing and improved customer satisfaction. Understanding these motivations is also crucial for policymakers, as free tours influence visitor flows, urban tourism dynamics, and potential overtourism. Insights from this study can guide the development of low-cost tourism products, better visitor management strategies, and fairer regulatory frameworks to balance the benefits of free tours while addressing challenges like unfair competition with traditional operators. Additionally, this research advances the conceptual understanding of platform-based tourism and contributes to empirical studies in this growing field.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Platform-mediated free tours: A new model in the tourism industry

Platform-mediated free tours have emerged as a popular and disruptive model in urban tourism (Nilsson & Zillinger, 2022). Unlike conventional licensed and pre-paid guided tours, free tours operate on a “pay-what-you-want” basis, meaning that participants are not charged a fixed price but instead leave a voluntary tip at the end (García & Ruiz, 2022). These tours are primarily offered in urban destinations with high tourist footfall and are particularly attractive to budget-conscious

travelers, solo tourists, and digital-native generations seeking flexible and experience-driven tourism options (Navalón-García & Mínguez, 2021). One of the key characteristics of free tours is that the guides are often independent freelancers rather than officially certified professionals. In many destinations, there is no requirement for tour guides to be accredited, leading to concerns about professionalism and accuracy of the information provided (Koerts, 2017). Despite this, free tours have gained traction due to their perceived authenticity, social engagement, and informal storytelling approach, which differs from the scripted narratives of traditional tours (Gutierrez-Duarte & Roldán-Martínez, 2020).

The growth of free tours has been driven by digital platforms such as Sandemans, Guruwalk, Civitatis, and Freetouring, which connect independent guides with tourists in a peer-to-peer service exchange under the 'sharing economy' umbrella (Juana, 2017). These platforms facilitate booking, customer reviews, and marketing but do not directly employ guides, instead functioning as intermediaries (Morozov, 2015). As a result, they have been criticized for creating an asymmetrical power dynamic where guides must pay commission fees per customer, yet lack job security and formal employment benefits (Leal Londoño & Medina, 2018).

While free tours provide an accessible and low-cost option for travelers, their rapid expansion has raised concerns about their broader impact on urban tourism. Critics argue that they contribute to issues such as overtourism, gentrification, and the commercialization of public spaces (Morales-Pérez et al., 2022). The absence of formal regulations has also led to tensions with certified tour guides and local tourism authorities, resulting in attempts to regulate or restrict free tours in cities like Barcelona, Amsterdam, and Prague (de Waal & Arets, 2022).

Despite these challenges, free tours continue to evolve, incorporating new themes such as historical walking tours, street art experiences, and gastronomic routes, demonstrating their adaptability within the platform economy (Pastor & Rivera-García, 2020). This model has often been compared to Airbnb's impact on the hospitality sector, as both disrupt traditional tourism services through platform mediation and deregulation (Pastor & Rivera-García, 2020).

2.2 The theory of planned behaviour

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) has become the most frequently utilised social-psychological model in tourism research (Ulker-Demirel & Ciftci, 2020). Numerous studies have

confirmed the robustness of the TPB as an explanatory and predictive model for specific behaviours, including sustainable tourism activities (Liu & Park, 2024). However, according to available research, it has not yet been used to study the attitudes that lead visitors to book free tours over regulated, predetermined-price tours. Ajzen and Fishbein's (1975) theory of reasoned action (TRA) suggests that behaviour is driven by intention to act, which in turn is influenced by attitudes and subjective norms. Criticised for assuming voluntary action (Ulker & Ciftci, 2020), Ajzen's (1991) TPB extends the TRA to include perceived behavioural control, thereby improving behaviour prediction. The TPB identifies three determinants of intention (WILL): attitude towards behaviour (ATTI), subjective norms (NORM) and perceived behavioural control (CONT) (Doll & Ajzen, 1992). The theory posits that positive attitudes, supportive social norms and high perceived control increase the intention to act. These factors' significance varies by context (Ajzen, 1991), with direct experience fostering more stable attitudes and intentions. Perceived control, akin to self-efficacy, is fundamental in shaping competence and willingness to engage in challenging tasks (Ajzen & Kruglanski, 2019).

2.3 Applying the TPB in tourism: Trust in the platform's eWOM

Research has shown that behavioural intention is influenced by three key constructs of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB): attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). These factors shape the way individuals evaluate and decide whether to engage in a particular behaviour, particularly in the context of digital platforms. Given the nature of platform-mediated free tours, which rely on online visibility, peer reviews, and perceived ease of access, these constructs become critical in explaining why tourists choose to book such tours.

A fundamental determinant of behavioural intention is attitude, which reflects a tourist's overall evaluation of the experience. This evaluation is shaped by the perceived benefits of free tours, such as their affordability, flexibility, and authenticity compared to conventional guided tours. Prior research has consistently demonstrated that attitude plays a significant role in influencing tourists' behavioural intentions in tourism-related decisions (Meng et al., 2024).

H1: Tourists' behavioural intention to book a platform-mediated free tour is positively influenced by their attitude.

In addition to attitude, subjective norms—the perceived social pressure to perform or avoid a behaviour—play a significant role in shaping tourists' decision-making (Ajzen, 1991). In the digital

era, subjective norms are heavily influenced by online reviews, social media recommendations, and peer feedback, which help build credibility and drive consumer behaviour (Confente, 2015; Reza & Samiei, 2012). As free tours operate in an environment where visibility and reputation are highly dependent on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), we propose that:

H2: Subjective norms positively influence tourists' behavioural intention to engage in platform-mediated free tour bookings.

Another key determinant of behavioural intention is perceived behavioural control (PBC), which refers to a tourist's confidence in their ability to successfully book and participate in a free tour (Nimri et al., 2020). This includes aspects such as the ease of accessing the booking platform, availability of tours, and convenience of the process. Studies in tourism behaviour suggest that a high level of PBC enhances the likelihood of engaging in a specific action (Khuong & Duyen, 2017). Thus, we propose:

H3: Tourists' perceived control positively influences their behavioural intention to book a platform-mediated free tour.

Furthermore, subjective norms not only influence direct booking intentions but also shape tourists' overall attitudes towards free tours. When a behaviour is widely accepted or encouraged within an individual's social circle, it reinforces a positive perception of the experience. In this regard, we hypothesise that:

H4: Tourists' attitude toward booking a platform-mediated free tour is positively influenced by subjective norms.

While TPB's core variables provide a robust framework to explain behavioural intentions, prior research suggests that incorporating additional factors—such as trust—can significantly enhance its predictive power (Ajzen, 2005; Jeng, 2019). In digital tourism platforms, trust acts as a key determinant of consumer decision-making, influencing whether tourists perceive a platform as reliable, credible, and safe to use. Since platform-mediated free tours rely on user-generated reviews and ratings, trust plays a fundamental role in shaping tourists' attitudes towards booking. Based on this, we hypothesise that:

H5: Tourists' positive attitude toward booking a platform-mediated free tour is influenced by their trust in the platform, including reviews from other online consumers.

In addition to influencing attitudes, trust in a platform's reputation can also shape subjective norms, as potential tourists may perceive social pressure to book a highly rated free tour. Positive reviews and word-of-mouth create an expectation that certain tours are the preferred choice, reinforcing decision-making patterns. Therefore, we propose:

H6: Tourists' subjective norms or social pressure to book a platform-mediated free tour are shaped by trust in the platform and reviews from other online consumers.

Finally, perceived behavioural control can also be affected by trust in the platform's reliability. When a platform has a strong online reputation and numerous positive reviews, potential tourists may feel more confident about navigating the booking process, reducing perceived risk and uncertainty (Möhlmann, 2015; Mao & Lyu, 2017). Accordingly, we hypothesise that:

H7: Tourists' perceived control over booking a free tour is influenced by their trust in the platform, including reviews from other online consumers.

This study builds upon these relationships by extending the TPB framework to integrate trust and eWOM as additional influencing factors, aiming to provide a more comprehensive model of tourist decision-making in the platform economy. By incorporating these elements, the proposed model offers deeper insights into how digital trust and peer influence shape consumer choices in tourism.

2.4 Sustainable values in the platform economy

The relationship between sustainability and consumer behaviour has been widely debated, particularly regarding the gap between favourable attitudes and actual behaviour. Prothero et al. (2011) and Möhlmann (2015) found that participation in collaborative consumption platforms fosters positive attitudes towards environmental sustainability. In particular, collaborative platforms are designed to enhance sustainability across three dimensions: environmental (ENVI), social (JUST), and economic (ECON) (Phipps et al., 2013). Within this framework, consumer values play a critical role in shaping attitudes and decision-making processes.

One of the key dimensions influencing consumer decisions is economic sustainability. Tourists engaging in collaborative consumption models—such as platform-mediated free tours—often do so because they perceive a financial advantage, cost-effectiveness, or equitable resource distribution. Hamari et al. (2016) suggest that economic sustainability motivations can be a strong driver for participation in collaborative economy platforms, particularly for those prioritising affordability and accessibility. Consequently, we hypothesise that:

H8: Tourists' economic sustainability values positively determine their attitude towards booking a platform-mediated free tour.

Beyond economic considerations, social sustainability plays an equally significant role in shaping consumer attitudes. Collaborative consumption is often linked to ethical consumerism, fair labour practices, and the redistribution of economic benefits across communities (Horlings, 2015). The attractiveness of platform-based tourism lies not only in its affordability but also in its ability to empower independent tour guides, promote cultural exchange, and foster local engagement. This aligns with previous research suggesting that a commitment to social justice can influence consumers' attitudes towards sustainable travel options (Garay et al., 2019). Based on this, we propose that:

H9: Tourists' commitment to social justice determines their attitude towards booking a platform-mediated free tour.

Finally, environmental sustainability is a core motivation for many travellers opting for platform-mediated services. Free walking tours are often marketed as eco-friendly alternatives to motorised sightseeing, as they reduce carbon footprints and promote pedestrian-friendly tourism (Navalón & Mínguez, 2016). However, the real impact of free tours must be critically assessed, considering factors such as group size, participant behaviour, and the environmental management practices of digital platforms. Sann et al. (2024) demonstrated that the attractiveness of sustainable alternatives significantly mediates the relationship between behavioural intention and tourism choices, reinforcing the need to examine the role of environmental awareness in consumer decision-making. Therefore, we hypothesise that:

H10: Tourists' environmental values and awareness positively determine their attitude towards booking a platform-mediated free tour.

Despite its growing relevance in academia, policy, and practice, the influence of sustainability values on tourist decision-making remains underexplored. This study builds upon Garay et al.'s (2019) model, incorporating a refined perspective on sustainability values as key drivers of consumer attitudes towards platform-mediated free tours. Additionally, Möhlmann (2015) highlights that rising scepticism towards capitalist systems and increasing anti-consumption movements have fuelled interest in more sustainable and ethically sourced tourism experiences. Understanding these intrinsic motivations provides a more nuanced perspective on how values shape the perception of sustainable tourism alternatives in the platform economy.

2.5 Loyalty: An influence of past experience

According to the academic literature, experience is an important moderating variable. Several studies have examined the occurrence of past experience prior to engaging in a particular behaviour and have assessed its relationship with subsequent behavioural intentions and loyalty (Corrons, 2018). Further studies have shown that past experience strongly influences subsequent intentions (Broekhuizen & Huizingh, 2009; Jayawardhena et al., 2007; May et al., 2005) and helps to reduce uncertainty and build loyalty (Hernandez et al., 2010).

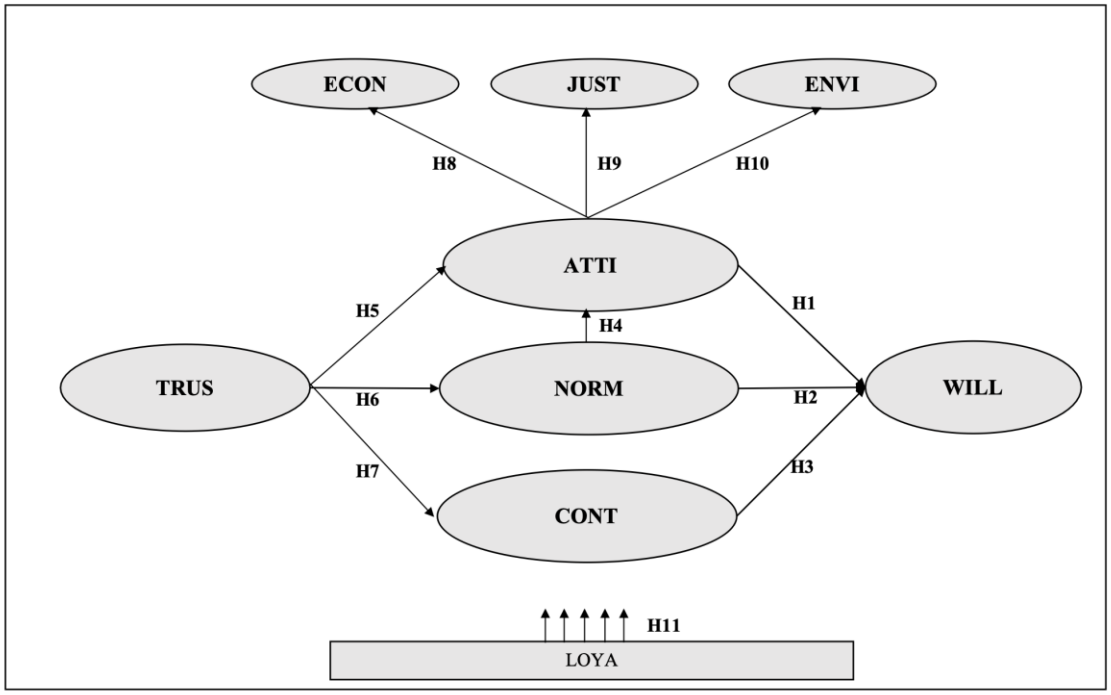
In studies using the TPB, various authors have pointed out that past experience and past behaviour can relatively explain sustainability behaviour (Gao et al., 2016; Garay et al., 2019; Sandve & Øgaard, 2013) and that individuals' experiences influence responsible behaviour in their personal lives (Chan & Hon, 2020). Some authors have reflected the particular relevance of this aspect in their research by including past behaviour as an additional variable in their model extensions (Lam & Hsu, 2006; Oh & Hsu, 2001).

Although past experience has been included as a moderating variable in various studies on the adoption of sustainable practices in non-tourism research (Mundaca, 2021; Urgal et al., 2011), there is no evidence of its impact on behavioural intentions to use online free tour booking platforms, particularly with sustainability connotations. Given the significant attention researchers have given to this variable (Chan & Hon, 2020; Gao et al., 2016; Garay et al., 2018; Lam & Hsu, 2006; Oh & Hsu, 2001; Sandve & Øgaard, 2013), past experience-derived loyalty has been included as a moderating variable in the extended TPB model. This inclusion allows for the analysis of behaviour based on varying levels of prior practices. Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H11: Loyalty plays a moderating role in tourists' behavioural intention to book a platform-mediated free tour.

The resulting research model (Figure 1) comprises 11 hypotheses: seven structural, three measurement, and one reflecting the moderating effect analysed.

Figure 1. The proposed model based on the TPB



Source: authors

3 Methodology

3.1 Survey design and scale measurement

This study aims to explore the motivations driving users to trust online platforms offering free walking tours compared to conventional paid tours. Survey items are presented as statements, with respondents indicating their level of agreement or disagreement on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. For internet-administered surveys, many authors recommend a seven-point scale to reduce excessive interpolation (Matas, 2018). Multi-item scales were used for variable measurement to adequately capture the domain of the established constructs and thus assess motivation based on Ajzen's (1991) TPB, trust in eWOM and the tourism sustainability variables. This study adopted and adapted existing validated items to assess predictor constructs of behavioural intention, specifically WILL (Zeithaml et al., 1996), ATTI (Bhattacherjee, 2002; Garay et al., 2019; George, 2004; Taylor & Todd, 1995), NORM and CONT (Bhattacherjee, 2002; George, 2004; Taylor & Todd, 1995), and TRUS, ENVI, JUST and ECON from Doney and Cannon (1997), Flavián and Guinalíu (2006) and Roy et al. (2001).

Before distributing the survey to the study population, a pre-test was conducted in July 2023 with a sample of 25 respondents, representative of the final target population. The purpose of the pre-test was to assess the clarity, wording, and structure of survey items, ensuring that all questions were interpreted correctly and the format was user-friendly for both online and in-person respondents. Minor adjustments were made to improve question comprehension and sequencing. The results of the pre-test confirmed the validity and reliability of the measurement scales, leading to the final survey version used in data collection. The final survey, administered in August 2023, had three sections: five socio-demographic questions, a section on online channel loyalty, and 24 items covering TPB dimensions, tourism sustainability, and trust in eWOM.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The Google Forms survey was available in Spanish, English, French, and German and was distributed both online and in person. Online distribution channels included social media and email, ensuring broader outreach to potential respondents. In-person distribution took place at the start and end points of free tours in six major European cities: Barcelona, Madrid, Málaga, Paris, Düsseldorf, and Berlin, from August to December 2023. Surveys were administered both daily and on weekends, ensuring coverage of different tourist profiles. Data collection followed a random approach, with surveys distributed per individual rather than per group to avoid response biases and ensure diverse perspectives among participants.

To facilitate participation, printed flyers containing introductions in all four languages (indicated by corresponding national flags) were provided at free tour locations. These flyers featured QR codes linking directly to the survey, allowing participants to complete it conveniently on their mobile devices. The selection of cities was based on convenience sampling, prioritizing high-tourism hubs with an active presence of platform-mediated free tour operators. A total of 372 fully completed responses were collected: 299 in Spanish, 48 in English, 17 in French, and eight in German.

A preliminary qualitative analysis was conducted to enhance the theoretical and empirical basis of the research by consulting qualified experts. This process identified three distinct dimensions related to sustainability, rather than a single construct. Each dimension was validated with three items, forming constructs that serve as antecedents to behavioural intention. Subsequently, descriptive analysis and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) were performed using SPSS 26.0 to verify the reliability and validity of the measurement items.

In the third step, the research model was analysed using structural equation modelling (SEM) with AMOS 24.0, and a confirmatory factor analysis was performed to test the goodness of fit. The discriminatory and convergent validity of the measurement model was examined using the statistics Normed χ2, GFI, TLI, IFI, NFI, CFI and RMSEA, to then examine the causal and measurement relationships among the constructs and test the proposed hypotheses (Gerbing & Anderson, 1988; Hair et al., 2014). In the fourth step, two sub-samples were used to assess behavioural intention, taking into account past experience. A metric invariance test was conducted to analyse this proposed moderating effect (Byrne, 2009).

4 Results

4.1 Respondents' demographic characteristics

The demographic characteristics of the sample (see Table 1) show a bias towards Spanish nationality (over 74%, n = 277). Most were aged between 18 and 39 (51%) and a significant proportion were university graduates (46%). The sample showed a significant tilt towards higher education, with 26.88% holding a bachelor's degree and 19.89% holding a master's, engineering or doctoral degree. Advanced and intermediate vocational education were also well represented, comprising 20.43% and 9.14% of respondents respectively.

These demographic characteristics underscore the prominence of young, digitally adept, and well-educated individuals in online travel planning and collaborative consumption. Their comfort with digital platforms and preference for low-cost, flexible travel options drive their engagement. Consistent with Möhlmann (2015), research indicates that women and young adults with at least a bachelor's degree are the primary respondents, with younger generations showing higher engagement in online travel planning, especially in collaborative consumption services.

Table 1. Respondents' demographic characteristics (n = 372)

	Category	n	(%)
Gender	Male	179	48.11
	Female	181	48.65
	Prefer not to say + Other	12	3.22
Age	18-29 years	82	22.04
	30-39 years	110	29.57
	40-49 years	98	26.34

	50-59 years	54	14.52
	60-69 years	24	6.45
	70 or older	4	1.08
Nationality	Spanish	277	74.46
	French	22	5.91
	Portuguese	12	3.23
	Mexican	9	2.42
	German	9	2.42
	Italian	5	1.34
	Other	38	10.22
Education level	Primary school education	7	1.88
	Secondary school education	81	21.77
	Intermediate vocational education	34	9.14
	Advanced vocational education	76	20.43
	Bachelor's degree (or equivalent)	100	26.88
	Master's degree, engineering degree or PhD	74	19.89

Source: authors

4.2 Mesurement model

EFA was used to uncover latent data structures and reduce dimensionality. The suitability of this approach was assessed and validated through a series of psychometric tests. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was then performed to test the adequacy of the overall measurement model. As shown in Table 2, the results showed a satisfactory fit to the data (x^2 = 549.979, df = 222, x^2 / df = 2.477, GFI = 0.909, TLI = 0.938, IFI = 0.949, NFI = 0.924, CFI = 0.948, RMSEA = 0.064,), meeting the cut-off values (Byrne, 2006; Hair et al., 2014). All items loaded above 0.50 on their assigned factors and were significantly associated with their specific constructs ($p < 0.01$). These results provided evidence for the unidimensionality of each scale. The scale items were also reliable, as evidenced by Cronbach's alpha values greater than 0.70.

Table 2. CFA measurement results

Constructs and items	λ	α	AVE	CR
Booking a city tour				
Behavioural intention		0.856	0.745	0.872
When I need to book a city tour, the internet is my first choice.	0.722			
I recommend using the internet to book a free tour to anyone who asks me for advice, including friends and family.	0.734			
I write positive reviews of free tours on the internet to help others.	0.568			
The experience of a free tour booked over the internet				
Attitude		0.953	0.890	0.961
It's common sense.	0.742			
It's an idea I like.	0.848			
It's a good, smart idea.	0.819			
Environmental sustainability		0.711	0.633	0.799
It's good for the environment because it's on foot.	0.682			
It doesn't contribute to overcrowding in the destination I'm visiting.	0.905			
It doesn't harm the destination I'm visiting through overcrowding.	0.909			
Social justice		0.882	0.720	0.885
It allows me to help the people involved in free tours (web platform employees and guides).	0.767			
It brings social benefits to the local community of the city where the free tour takes place.	0.719			
It's good for my conscience to know that I'm helping the people involved (web platform employees and guides).	0.673			
Economic sustainability		0.707	0.711	0.778

It brings economic benefits to those involved (customers, web platform and guides).	**0.686**			
It brings economic benefits to the local host community.	**0.765**			
It brings greater benefits to those involved than conventional paid tours.	**0.651**			
Booking a free tour over the internet				
Subjective norms		**0.945**	**0.862**	**0.948**
The people whose opinions I value are in favour of me using the internet to book a free tour.	**0.837**			
Most people I value think it's right to book a free tour online.	**0.785**			
I'm expected to use the internet to book a free tour.	**0.769**			
Using the internet to book a free tour				
Perceived control		**0.984**	**0.954**	**0.984**
It's something I control.	**0.892**			
I can do it because I have the resources, knowledge and ability to do it.	**0.899**			
I'm capable of doing it.	**0.880**			
Opinions of other tourists on free tour websites				
Trust		**0.872**	**0.729**	**0.887**
They are truthful and honest and that's why I trust them.	**0.811**			
I believe that free tour websites would not intentionally publish anything that could harm their users.	**0.673**			
I trust them completely for my free tour bookings.	**0.773**			

Source: authors

The composite reliability (CR) of the measures, which indicates the internal consistency of multiple indicators for each construct, ranged from 0.778 to 0.984, exceeding the threshold recommended by Bagozzi and Yi (1988) and Hair et al. (2014). Convergent validity was also confirmed by

estimating the average variance extracted (AVE) for the measures. All AVE values, ranging from 0.633 to 0.954, exceeded the recommended value of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Furthermore, the AVE value for each construct was greater than the squared correlation between the constructs (Hair et al., 2014), indicating that discriminant validity was achieved (see Table 3).

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Table 3. AVE and inter-construct correlations

	WILL	ATTI	NORM	CONT	TRUS	ECON	JUST	ENVI	AVE
WILL	**0.836**								0.745
ATTI	0.875	**0.944**							0.890
NORM	0.762	0.805	**0.927**						0.860
CONT	0.754	0.759	0.729	**0.976**					0.954
TRUS	0.654	0.752	0.774	0.517	**0.854**				0.729
ECON	0.635	0.694	0.564	0.556	0.573	**0.792**			0.711
JUST	0.695	0.783	0.719	0.591	0.728	0.756	**0.848**		0.720
ENVI	0.324	0.297	0.265	0.231	0.230	0.612	0.268	**0.795**	0.633

Source: authors

4.3 Structural model evaluation

Structural equation modelling (SEM) analyses were performed using maximum likelihood estimation. The results shown in Table 4 indicate that the model provided a good fit to the data (x^2 = 681.349, df = 239, x^2 / df = 2.851, GFI = 0.894, TLI = 0.910, IFI = 0.923, NFI = 0.902, CFI = 0.922, RMSEA = 0.072) according to the specifications of Byrne (2006) and Hair et al. (2014).

It should be noted that behavioural intention, the dependent variable under investigation in this study, has an explained variance (R^2) of 77.1%. This means that the research model accounts for 77% of the variance in behavioural intention, which is significantly higher than the commonly reported 40% for the TPB (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Rise et al., 2010). Attitude, as a direct antecedent of behavioural intention, has an R^2 of 75.8%, while subjective norms and perceived control have R^2 values of 62.9% and 32.5% respectively. Furthermore, the direct antecedent variables of attitude show high R^2 ratios, with social justice providing 72.6%, economic sustainability over 58% and environmental sustainability a staggering 160%.

The model shows that nine of the ten hypotheses are supported. Only Hypothesis 2, the influence of subjective norms on behavioural intention, is rejected with a factor (β) of 0.001 at a significance level of $p > 0.986$. This means that subjective norms do not exert a direct or positive influence on platform users' behavioural intention to book a free tour. The two remaining causal relationships – attitude ($\beta = 0.735$) and perceived control ($\beta = 0.247$) – exert a direct and positive influence on behavioural intention at a significance level of $p < 0.001$. Subjective norms act in the same way ($\beta = 0.518$), exerting a direct and positive influence on attitude. In this regard, trust, as an antecedent of the main variables of the TPB model, has a significant relationship with attitude (β = 0400), subjective norms ($\beta = 0.793$) and perceived control ($\beta = 0.570$). When analysing the three measurement relationships established in the research model, the results indicate that users' attitude towards booking a free tour online is positively determined by the influence of values such as social justice ($\beta = 0.852$), environmental sustainability ($\beta = 1.269$) and economic sustainability ($\beta = 0.763$), all at a significance level of $p < 0.001$.

Table 4. Results of the structural model assessment

Hypothesis	β	p-value	Result
H1: Attitude → Intention	0.735	***	Supported
H2: Subjective norms → Intention	0.001	0.986	Not supported
H3: Perceived control → Intention	0.247	***	Supported
H4: Subjective norms → Attitude	0.518	***	Supported
H5: Trust → Attitude	0.400	***	Supported

H6: Trust → Subjective norms	0.793	***	Supported
H7: Trust → Perceived control	0.570	***	Supported
H8: Environmental values → Attitude	1.269	***	Supported
H9: Social justice → Attitude	0.852	***	Supported
H10: Economic values → Attitude	0.763	***	Supported

Note: Goodness-of-fit statistics for the structural model: x^2 = 681.349, df = 239, x^2 / df = 2.851, GFI = 0.894, TLI = 0.910, IFI = 0.923, NFI = 0.902, CFI = 0.922, RMSEA = 0.072. *** p-value < 0.001

4.4 Moderating effect of loyalty

Finally, path differences between experienced (n = 214) and novice (n = 158) users of platform-mediated free tours were examined to explore the moderating effect of loyalty. A permutation test assessed the measurement invariance of construct items across these subgroups. Results showed no significant difference in the c-value of permutation structures between the subgroups, confirming compositional invariance. Additionally, mean permutation values and the variance of mean permutation differences were within the 95% confidence interval bounds.

Table 5. Multigroup analysis. Moderating effect of Loyalty

Hypothesis	Experienced	Novice	Path differences	Result
H1: ATTI → WILL	0.734***	0.751***	0,017	Not supported
H2: NORM → WILL	0.039	-0.100	-0,139	Supported
H3: CONT → WILL	0.235***	0.301***	0,066	Not supported
H4: NORM → ATTI	0.511***	0.593***	0,082	Not supported
H5: TRUS → ATTI	0.403***	0.316***	-0,087	Not supported
H6: TRUS → NORM	0.753***	0.836***	0,083	Not supported
H7: TRUS → CONT	0.532***	0.652***	0,12	Supported
H8: ENVI → ATTI	1.369***	1.156***	-0,213	Supported
H9: JUST → ATTI	0.809***	0.865***	0.056	Not supported
H10: ECON → ATTI	0.786***	0.738***	-0,048	Not supported

Note: *** p-value < 0.001

The results suggest that loyalty has a marginally significant effect on the decision to book free tours via online platforms, with most hypotheses showing only slight increases in factor loadings. However, H7, which examines the impact of trust on perceived control, is more relevant among beginners. Although H2 also shows a difference in load, this hypothesis is rejected for both groups, aligning with the overall sample analysis. Increased load on H8 among experienced consumers indicates higher environmental awareness when using free tours compared to beginners. Overall, the findings partially support the hypothesis that loyalty influences the decision to book platform-mediated free tours.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

5.1 Discussion

The aim of this study was to analyse behavioural intention to understand consumers' decision-making processes when booking platform-mediated free tours, beyond just the price factor. Given the complexity of assessing behavioural intention towards intangible aspects like trust in a platform and perceived sustainability (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Bamberg, 2003; Garay et al., 2019), it was essential to adapt and extend the TPB, which is typically used to examine the beliefs underlying attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioural control.

Structural equation modelling was used to develop a measurement model based on existing literature, identifying seven structural and three measurement relationships, plus one moderating effect. The results supported nine hypotheses and rejected one. The moderating effect hypothesis (H11) on loyalty in booking platform-mediated free tours had only a marginally significant impact, indicating that while loyalty plays a role in decision-making, trust and sustainability remain stronger determinants. This model enhances understanding of behavioural intentions regarding sustainability and platform usability.

Contrary to prevailing literature (Ajzen, 1991; Doll & Ajzen, 1992; Mao & Lyu, 2017), the factorial weight of the NORM-WILL relationship was found to be insignificant. This indicates that subjective norms (Hypothesis 2), or individuals' beliefs about social pressure and the importance of others' opinions, do not significantly influence consumers' behavioural intentions to book platform-mediated free tours, despite the TPB's commonly claimed influence. However, subjective norms significantly affect attitude (Hypothesis 4), and attitude positively influences intention (Hypothesis 1), suggesting that while subjective norms may not directly impact booking intentions, they

contribute to a positive attitude towards the behaviour, thereby increasing the likelihood of booking a platform-mediated free tour.

These findings align partially with Garay et al. (2019), who emphasized the mediating role of attitude between subjective norms and behavioural intention, noting that individuals' attitudes towards an activity are shaped by perceptions of social expectations, which then influence their intentions. Garay et al. suggested that sustainability attitudes directly impact social norms, but rejected a direct influence of subjective norms on attitudes. This contrasts with the current results, which show that subjective norms directly influence attitudes and, through these attitudes, indirectly affect behavioural intentions. This discrepancy supports Ajzen's (1991) assertion that the importance of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control varies by context, highlighting the complex interplay between these dimensions and the need for further research.

Despite having the lowest factorial weight of all accepted hypotheses, perceived behavioural control (Hypothesis 3), or visitors' self-perceived ability to book these activities, plays a crucial role in explaining variance in their behaviour. This suggests that greater perceived control over performing the behaviour enhances the intention to do so. This supports previous studies (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Mao & Lyu, 2017; Möhlmann, 2015; Nimri et al., 2020; Reeve, 2010; Reza & Samiei, 2012) and establishes this dimension as vital for developing competence, efficacy, and capacity (Reeve, 2010). These findings align with Ajzen and Kruglanski (2019), who found that low levels of perceived control lead individuals towards simpler tasks and uncomplicated plans, such as booking a platform-mediated free tour.

Ter et al. (2017) argue that while trust in the platform economy is influential, its underlying mechanisms remain complex and require further investigation. This study confirms that trust significantly and positively affects attitudes towards booking platform-mediated free tours (Hypothesis 5), aligning with Mao and Lyu (2017) and Meng et al. (2024), who found that trust, particularly from eWOM, shapes purchase decisions. It also supports Navalón and Minguez's (2016) assertion that platforms offering free tours gain market penetration by establishing a positive reputation. Additionally, trust significantly influences subjective norms (Hypothesis 6), consistent with Reza and Samiei (2012), who demonstrated that greater trust in information sources affects perceptions of social expectations. Similarly, Mao and Lyu (2017) found that trust, shaped by eWOM, influences repurchase intentions on tourism platforms like Airbnb.

Our findings contrast with Ter et al. (2017), who suggested a more limited impact of trust, as they show that trust positively influences perceived control (Hypothesis 7). This aligns with Jeng (2019), Möhlmann (2015), and Mao and Lyu (2017), who identified positive relationships between trust, perceived usefulness, ease of use, and purchase decisions. This indicates that higher trust enhances an individual's perception of control over performing a behaviour. Nimri et al. (2020) also confirmed the strong impact of perceived behavioural control on booking intentions, especially for green hotels, supporting the broader literature on trust and perceived control.

Garay et al.'s (2019) decomposed TPB model facilitated our exploration of consumers' attitudes towards the inclusion of sustainability factors in platform-mediated free tours, based on their perceptions of the benefits of adopting sustainability innovations (Hypotheses 8, 9 and 10). Environmental values (Hypothesis 8), social justice (Hypothesis 9) and economic values (Hypothesis 10) all significantly and positively influence attitudes, suggesting that individuals prioritising these values have a more positive attitude towards booking such tours. Our model confirms that attitudes are explained by these factors, which is consistent with Garay et al.'s (2019) claim that motivations to behave sustainably are influenced by whether the expected benefits are directed towards oneself, others or the biosphere. The positive impact of environmental values also supports Khuong and Duyen (2017) and Abbasi et al. (2021), who highlighted the influence of perceived value, service quality, and destination image on satisfaction. These findings build on Lam and Hsu's (2006) exploration of the links between travel motivation and attitudes, integrating the impact of sustainability values.

Although loyalty (H11) was included in the model as a potential determinant of booking intentions, its impact was only marginally significant. This suggests that while consumers might develop a sense of loyalty towards a particular platform, this loyalty does not strongly dictate booking behaviour. Instead, trust in the platform (H5-H7) and sustainability values (H8-H10) play a more decisive role. This finding aligns with previous studies in the platform economy, which indicate that consumer trust and perceived value often outweigh loyalty in shaping behavioural intentions (Möhlmann, 2015; Meng et al., 2024). Future research should explore whether loyalty gains more relevance in long-term platform engagement or if other variables, such as pricing incentives and service differentiation, mediate its effect.

5.2 Theoretical contributions

The first theoretical contribution of this study is its demonstration of the value in further refining and decomposing the TPB to enhance its predictive power regarding consumers' behavioural intentions towards emerging activities in the tourism sector. By linking these activities to consumers' underlying beliefs about attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioural control, this approach enriches the TPB and offers predictive insights into consumer intentions within the evolving platform tourism industry.

Additionally, this research contributes uniquely through its contextual focus. Unlike most established traveller behaviour models, which are predominantly developed in Western contexts (Hsu & Huang, 2012), this study applies a TPB-based model to platform-mediated free tours. Academic literature on this specific topic is limited, and, to the authors' knowledge, no prior studies have explored consumer purchase behaviour and intentions in this context. Given the growing importance of this activity compared to traditional tours (García & Ruiz, 2022; Navalón & Mínguez, 2016; Nilsson & Zillinger, 2022) and its socio-spatial and labour impacts in major European cultural capitals (Rivera et al., 2023), this research fills a gap in the tourism literature. It provides valuable insights for marketers and destination managers to better understand and manage market characteristics and contributes to destination governance by addressing the impacts associated with this activity (Rivera et al., 2023).

Subjective norms indirectly influence free tour consumers through attitudes. To positively influence potential consumers, destination governance managers, guide associations and neighbourhood groups should consider this indirect influence. Leveraging the significant impact of sustainability variables on attitudes can aid in this effort. Perceived behavioural control is also a key predictor of behavioural intention, so stakeholders in destination governance and guiding activities should emphasise that booking a conventional tour with a certified guide is as easy and under one's control as booking through a free tour platform.

5.3 Practical implications

The findings of this study offer valuable management implications for industry professionals and stakeholders involved in platform-mediated guided tours. The study empirically shows how these tours can shape potential tourists' attitudes and visit intentions. This detailed understanding of the effects of platform-mediated activities on consumer behaviour can aid destinations in strategically incorporating these products into their management models.

Previous research highlights transparency, security, and usability as crucial factors for building trust in digital platforms. Managers should prioritise technologies that ensure high levels of transparency and security to foster trust. Additionally, developers should focus on enhancing usability and integrating personalised features in digital shopping experiences. Personalised elements such as recommendations, notifications, and customisable settings can reduce distrust, boost engagement, and provide a more satisfying user experience, potentially leading to higher conversion rates.

An intriguing finding from this study is that, while subjective norms do not directly influence behavioural intentions, they significantly shape individuals' attitudes towards the behaviour. In other words, social expectations may not directly dictate engagement intentions but do impact attitudes, which then influence behavioural intentions. To address resistance to behavioural change, focusing on customers' perceived ease of use is crucial. Ensuring that platform-mediated experiences are user-friendly and intuitive is key to building trust and enhancing the perceived usefulness of the technology. Tourism organisations and developers should actively seek user feedback and continuously refine their platforms based on this input and technological advancements.

This study underscores the significance of tourists' attitudes towards platform-mediated tourism experiences, as positive attitudes can enhance actual visit intentions. Perceived usefulness is crucial in shaping these attitudes. To foster favourable attitudes, tourism organisations should highlight the benefits of platform-based experiences. Effective marketing strategies could focus on unique experiences, convenience, cost-effectiveness, and sustainability. For instance, emphasising opportunities for local insights and personalised experiences can attract tourists. Additionally, tourism staff should promote responsible behaviour during guided tours, demonstrating how actions like reducing carbon footprints and preserving cultural heritage benefit the environment and local communities.

This approach is likely to appeal to environmentally conscious travellers and encourage positive attitudes towards platform-mediated tourism. Furthermore, to address the negative relationship between subjective norms and visit intentions, marketers should encourage users to share their experiences on social media. This can enhance visibility and credibility, creating a positive subjective norm that motivates others to try the platform.

Trust is identified as a critical factor affecting attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control in platform-mediated tourism experiences. Values related to environmental protection, social justice,

and economic sustainability also positively influence attitudes towards these behaviours. These insights highlight the importance of managing perceptions and trust to foster behavioural intentions.

The marginal significance of loyalty in booking decisions suggests different responses to marketing efforts among experienced users and beginners. Beginners, who are more influenced by trust, benefit from marketing that emphasizes transparency, reliable service, and strong customer support. Highlighting user reviews and offering guarantees can build trust. Conversely, experienced users, who show higher environmental awareness, respond better to sustainability-focused marketing that showcases eco-friendly practices and conservation efforts.

Tailoring marketing campaigns to each group is crucial: informative content and community-building for beginners, and sustainability appeals for experienced users. Continuous improvement based on user feedback and strategic partnerships with environmental organisations can further enhance engagement and loyalty. A nuanced approach addressing the distinct needs of beginners and experienced users is most effective for driving bookings and loyalty in platform-mediated free tours. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics to navigate the evolving platform-mediated tourism landscape effectively.

5.4 Limitations and further research

Despite its contributions, this research has several limitations, suggesting areas for further study. Firstly, the dataset is focused primarily on Spain, which introduces regional bias. This limits understanding of how behavioural dependence might vary by nationality or region. Broader field experiments in diverse geographical areas could offer insights into these variations. For instance, future research could explore whether the influence of subjective norms on intention differs significantly across countries and whether the relationship between intention, attitude, and perceived behavioural control operates similarly across different regions.

While this study attempts to refine the TPB by incorporating sustainability and trust-related constructs, further research is needed to examine how these factors evolve over time and across different consumer profiles. Future research should explore whether loyalty gains more relevance in long-term platform engagement or if other variables, such as pricing incentives and service differentiation, mediate its effect. Although the TPB is useful for explaining sustainability perceptions leading to attitudes, broader implications for decision-making on similar platforms should be considered. We agree with Garay et al. (2019) that further research is needed to

understand the socio-cognitive determinants of pro-sustainability behaviour. An open question is the interplay between behavioural intention, subjective norms, and perceived control.

This paper provides a detailed analysis of these relationships as multidimensional concepts, breaking down NORM and CONT into measurable variables for a more nuanced understanding. Future research could benefit from demonstrating the advantages of decomposing NORM into sub-variables, such as normative beliefs and motivations (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005) or internal and external influences (Garay et al., 2019). This approach could enhance the model's explanatory power and offer deeper insights into the underlying logic.

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