

Revisiting the effects of travel satisfaction on visitor's behavioral intentions – Evidence from a cultural heritage site

Abstract

Purpose: This study extend the existing literature by providing a new consideration of the effects of travel satisfaction in a context where the role of travel satisfaction might be more ambiguous than in conventional settings.

Design/methodology/approach: Structural equation modelling (SEM) and multi-group analysis are applied on responses from visitors (n=225) of the Italian city of Vicenza and its world heritage site (WHS) of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Findings: The findings demonstrate the positive effects of destination image, destination distinctiveness, and destination familiarity on behavioral intentions. The effects between these constructs are stronger when satisfaction is high (versus low).

Originality value: Instead of conceptualizing satisfaction as predictor or mediator of behavioral intentions in previous research, this study highlights the moderating effect of travel satisfaction.

Key words: Behavioral intentions, destination loyalty, heritage tourism, multi-group analysis, travel satisfaction

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural tourism bears significant potential for the economic development of many regions. For many destinations, culture is more easily exploitable and accessible than other tourism products (Richards 2011). Since ancient times, the consumption of cultural heritage is one of the most important motivations to travel (Waitt 2000). Although there might be different reasons for travelers to visit cultural heritage destinations, the site's perceived heritage characteristics are usually one of the most important travel motivations for visiting cultural heritage destinations (Poria et al. 2001).

In this context, the study of the consumer has been an underexplored area in cultural heritage tourism (Palau-Saumell et al. 2013). Although there are previous studies focusing on travel motivations to cultural heritage sites (see Poria et al. 2004), the antecedents of loyalty toward heritage destinations have received limited attention (Chi and Hu 2008). The latest studies in this field focus among others on the effects of institutional designations in order to explain tourist behavior. According to Poria et al. (2011), the cumulative effect of the world heritage site (WHS) designation by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is positively related to willingness to revisit a particular country.

Although there is preliminary research addressing the effects of travel satisfaction on visitor loyalty toward cultural heritage sites, most of them conceptualize travel satisfaction either as predictor or as mediator.

The objectives of this study are therefore to extend the existing literature by providing a new consideration of the effects of travel satisfaction in a context (i.e. cultural heritage sites) where the role of travel satisfaction might be more ambiguous than in conventional settings. Focusing on the specific case of a heritage site, this study

advances the argument that due to the divergence in opinions regarding the effects of travel satisfaction, further investigations of the role of travel satisfaction might employ a more nuanced consideration of the construct and distinguish between different levels of travel satisfaction. There are very few studies analyzing the moderating effects of destination satisfaction with multi-group analysis, as most studies conceptualize destination satisfaction as predictor or mediating variable of tourists' behavioral intentions.

The paper starts with introducing travel motivations to cultural heritage destinations. Based on this, hypotheses for an empirical model are defined and the results of an online survey are tested with structural equation modelling and multi-group analysis. Finally, the theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

2. Literature review

Heritage tourism falls under the category of cultural tourism (and vice versa), and is one of the most ancient forms of travel (Timothy and Boyd 2006). Cultural heritage tourism mainly includes visiting archeological and historic sites, cultural festivals, traditional shows, dances and ceremonies, or shopping of handcrafted arts (Besculides 2002).

The motivation for visiting cultural heritage sites is generally characterized by the profile of the heritage tourist, which is different from the profile of conventional tourists (Remoaldo et al. 2014). Perez (2009) identifies three profiles of heritage tourists: 1) "The culturally motivated", which is a small market segment that is attracted by cultural reasons and spends several nights at a heritage destination; 2) "The culturally inspired", which is inspired by cultural sites and only spends short periods of time at cultural destinations, but is motivated to return to the same place; and 3) "The culturally attracted", which

carry out a day visit to cultural sites, but are not strictly motivated by cultural reasons. Visitor profiles of cultural heritage sites tend to include more women than men, younger ages, and higher educational levels (Remoaldo et al. 2014).

Poria et al. (2004) distinguish between three groups of reasons for visiting cultural sites: Recreational experience, heritage experience, learning history. The first group looking for recreational experiences is made up of reasons such as the desire to have a day out, to be entertained and to see a world-famous site, and to relax. The second group of reasons is that the site's heritage is part of the visitor's own heritage, whereas visitors perceive a desire to pray there and to be emotionally involved, as well as a sense of obligation. The third group's reasons are willingness to learn, to discover the physical nature of the site and its historic background (Poria et al. 2004).

After analyzing panel data from 66 countries between 2006 and 2009, Su and Lin (2014) for example find that there is a positive relationship between countries having heritage sites and tourist numbers. Ribaudo and Figini (2016) however show that, on average, growth rates of tourism demand in the 5 years after WHS listing are not higher than growth rates in the 5 years before the listing. For a mature destination like Italy, there is no statistical evidence that WHS listing is associated with accelerating market growth rates (Ribaudo and Figini 2016). Besides, Poria et al. (2011) found that only moderate awareness of the designation or its logo barely affects visitors' behaviors.

Although there is divergence with regards to the effects of the WHS designation by the UNESCO on tourism patterns, there is convergence that cultural heritage might have a positive effect on tourists' behavioral intentions (Poria et al. 2011).

In the case of cultural heritage sites, destination image was already identified as a main predictor of behavioral intentions

(Chen and Chen 2010). There is strong empirical support on the positive effects of destination image on behavioral intentions (Chen and Tsai 2007). With regards to cultural heritage sites, there is also evidence that the destination's attributes and specific characteristics exert a significant effect on behavioral intentions (Poria et al. 2004). Cultural distinctiveness has been identified as important factor influencing behavioral intentions and loyalty (Kladou and Kehagis 2014). Besides, Anton et al. (2017) for example highlight the effects of past travel experience with a heritage site on future behavioral intentions. There is a solid basis of research (Alegre and Cladera 2006) suggesting a positive relationship between past travel experience and familiarity on behavioral intentions and destination loyalty.

3. Specification of an empirical model

3.1 Destination image

Kim and Richardson (2003) define destination image as "the totality of impressions, beliefs, ideas, expectations and feelings accumulated towards a place over time by an individual or group of people".

Destination image is likely to guide tourists in the process of choosing a destination, the subsequent evaluation of the trip, and future behavioral intentions (Chi and Hu 2008). Positive destination images may increase travelers' intentions to revisit the destination in the future (Chen and Tsai 2007). When tourists have a positive destination image, they are likely to be more satisfied (Liu et al. 2015). Positive images of the destination can strengthen both immediate and future intentions to return (Bigne et al. 2009). For these reasons, it can be hypothesized that:

Destination image has a positive significant relationship with behavioral intentions (H1)

3.2 Destination distinctiveness

The perceived distinctiveness of a destination is defined by its sense of place. Jiven and Larkham (2003) define sense of place as a description of the atmosphere of a place and the quality of its environment. Sense of place refers not only to visual and morphological appearances of places, but also to the emotional experience with a place and the retrospective reaction toward it. Sense of place mainly affects the intangible assets of a place, which means that determining the sense of a place relies on experience through sense, memory, intellect and imagination (Jiven and Larkham 2003).

Tourist perceptions of heritage sites with important cultural heritage not only shape the destination image, but also seem to have a significant effect on tourists' choices (Remoaldo et al. 2014). Chen and Chen (2010) demonstrate a positive link between experience quality, perceived value, satisfaction and behavioral intentions for returning to heritage sites. Therefore, it can be assumed that:

Destination distinctiveness has a positive relationship with behavioral intentions (H2)

3.3 Destination familiarity

The degree of familiarity with a destination is a function of the visual or mental impression of the destination (Milman and Pizam 1995). Destination familiarity can be defined as the number of destination-related experiences accumulated through continuous visits (Tasci et al. 2007). The more time with an environment or people a tourist spends, and the more recent the exposure to it, the more familiar the stimulus becomes (Lee and Crompton 1992). A high degree of destination familiarity suggests more time to explore the attractions on offer and in greater depth.

Tourists that are familiar with a destination tend to be more interested in and likely to revisit the destination than tourists who are only aware of the destination. Tourists may develop their destination knowledge from awareness to familiarity, while their interest and likelihood to visit the destination increase (Milman and Pizam 1995).

Destination familiarity can thus positively influence travel intentions, since familiar tourists show higher propensities for returning to a place than unfamiliar travelers (Chen and Lin 2012). Therefore, the following hypothesis can be defined:

Destination familiarity has a positive relationship with behavioral intentions (H3)

3.4 Travel satisfaction and behavioral intentions

Previous research mostly conceptualized satisfaction as predictor or mediator variable on behavioral intentions (Assaker et al. 2011; Prayag and Ryan 2012; Yoon and Uysal 2005). Feng and Jang (2007) for example show that satisfaction is a direct antecedent of short-term revisit intention, and that novelty seeking is a predictor of mid-term revisit intentions.

However, the link between satisfaction and behavioral intentions might be even more complex (Dolcinar et al. 2013). For instance, satisfied tourists might not strictly return to the same destination if they prefer to see other destinations (Gitelson and Crompton 1984), whereas less satisfied tourists might become repeat visitors in order to avoid perceived risk (Oppermann 2000). Therefore, there is a certain ambiguity regarding the effects of travel satisfaction on behavioral intentions. Although travel satisfaction might have an important influence on behavioral intentions, the two constructs may not have a direct relationship. This suggests that travel satisfaction could be a moderator affecting

the strength of the relationships between the predictor variables of behavioral intention and behavioral intention.

For these reasons, this study holds that travel satisfaction should be considered as a moderator of the relationships between destination image, destination distinctiveness, destination familiarity and behavioral intentions:

Tourist satisfaction has a positive moderating effect on the relationships between the predictors of behavioral intention and behavioral intention (H4)

Tourist satisfaction has a positive moderating effect on the relationship between destination image and behavioral intention (H4a)

Tourist satisfaction has a positive moderating effect on the relationship between perceived destination distinctiveness and behavioral intention (H4b)

Tourist satisfaction has a positive moderating effect on the relationship between destination familiarity and behavioral intention (H4c)

In order to analyze the moderating effects of travel satisfaction on the relationships between destination image, destination distinctiveness, destination familiarity and behavioral intentions, a hypothetical model was developed. As mentioned before, the predictor variables were chosen in alignment with previous research. There is empirical support that it is the destination's image and perceived distinctiveness, as well as past experiences with the destination that incite tourists to (re-)visit a cultural heritage site. The hypotheses and relationships that are being addressed with the empirical model are shown in fig. 1.

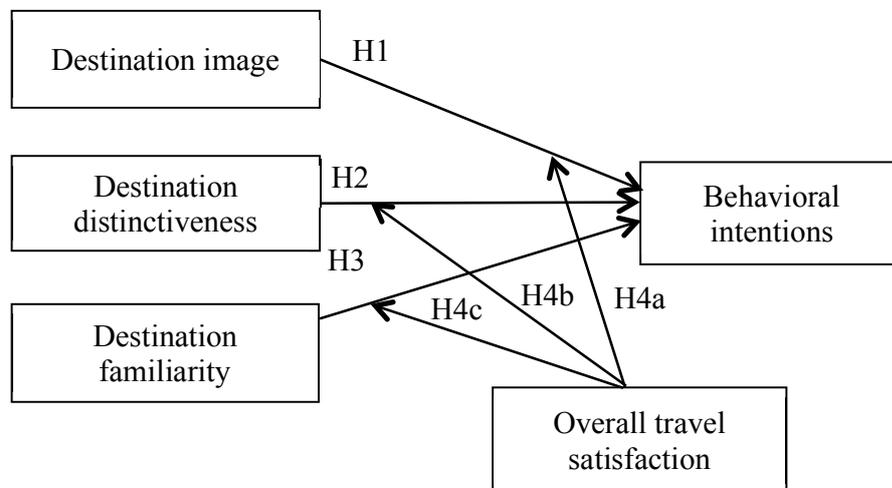


Fig. 1 Conceptual framework

4. Methodology

For the purpose of this study, visitors of the city of Vicenza and the surrounding area were targeted through an online survey. The survey was conducted at the end of 2014. The questionnaire belonging to the survey was posted on the website and Facebook® profiles of international travel agencies in order to obtain responses. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the research before they replied to the questionnaire. The data sample is derived from a non-probability convenience sampling method. In total, 225 international tourists completed the questionnaire, which was composed of three parts. The first part dealt with information related to the trip to Vicenza. It included items describing the travel behavior of respondents (i.e. number of visits of Vicenza, purpose of visit). The second part was designed to assess the respondent's satisfaction, destination image, destination distinctiveness perception, familiarity and behavioral intentions. The third part contained questions about the demographic profile of the visitors such as gender, age, and level of education.

The study instrument was designed in accordance with previous research. All constructs were measured through items using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 for "strongly disagree" to 7 for "strongly agree". The results of the second part of the online questionnaire, which asked visitors about their satisfaction, destination image, perceived distinctiveness, destination familiarity and behavioral intentions, was used for testing the hypothesis. Visitor satisfaction was measured by using the satisfaction scale developed by Lee et al. (2007), which includes items dealing with the visitor's experience in Vicenza. In order to measure destination image, five items used by Tasci et al. (2007) were employed. Perceived destination distinctiveness was measured with four items adapted from

Kladou and Kehagis (2014). Familiarity was measured by four items adapted from Kim and Richardson (2003). Behavioral intentions were evaluated by two items asking visitors about their likelihood of returning to Vicenza (behavioral loyalty) and their likelihood of recommending Vicenza to others (attitudinal loyalty). These two items were adapted from Kozak (2001) and Palau-Saumell et al. (2013).

5. Results

The main study consisted of 225 participants, so the necessary number of 200 observations for applying structural equation modeling (SEM) has been respected. 47 percent of the surveyed persons were male. Half of the respondents were younger than 35 years. Most respondents came from European countries (72 percent), the rest came from Asia (12 percent), North America (14 percent) and other countries (2 percent). The majority of the participants came to Vicenza to spend their vacation there (69 percent). 40 percent of the respondents came to Vicenza for the first time. Furthermore, most visitors have a secondary level of education (53 percent), the rest has a primary level (15 percent) or an academic level (32 percent).

5.1 Factor analysis

A factor analysis was performed to detect the factorial structure of destination image, destination distinctiveness, destination familiarity, satisfaction and behavioral intentions. Table 1 shows that most factor loadings were higher than 0.7 on a threshold, ranging from 0.67 to 0.96.

The results showed that Cronbach alpha was $\alpha = 0.93$ for satisfaction, $\alpha = 0.86$ for destination image, $\alpha = 0.88$ for destination distinctiveness, $\alpha = 0.85$ for destination familiarity, and $\alpha = 0.90$ for behavioral intentions.

Constructs	Items	Loading	α
Satisfaction	- My overall experience with Vicenza was higher than my expectations	0.90	0.93
	- Visiting Vicenza was a wonderful experience	0.96	
	- Vicenza is one of the best destination I have ever visited	0.94	
	- Vicenza is safe and secure	0.67	
Destination image	- Vicenza offers exciting and interesting places to visit	0.84	0.86
	- Vicenza has beautiful scenery and natural attractions	0.89	
	- Vicenza has a pleasant climate	0.69	
	- As a tourism destination, Vicenza offers good value for money	0.91	
	- Vicenza is Palladio and the Palladian villas	0.83	
Destination distinctiveness	- Vicenza is a famous UNESCO World Heritage site	0.87	0.88
	- Vicenza with its "baccalà" (stockfish) tradition, wines and grappa is a foodie destination	0.90	
	- Vicenza with the Monte Berico Sanctuary is a sacred destination	0.84	
Destination familiarity	- Familiarity with the lifestyle of the people in Vicenza	0.86	0.85
	- Familiarity with the cultural/historical attractions in Vicenza	0.89	
	- Familiarity with the landscape in Vicenza	0.83	
	- Familiarity with the nighttime entertainment in Vicenza	0.78	
Behavioral intention	- Likelihood of revisiting Vicenza	0.81	0.89
	- Likelihood of recommending Vicenza	0.79	

Table 1: Reliability of items

5.2 Confirmatory factor analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to test the reliability and validity of the research model. As shown in table 2, the overall model fit indices for the confirmatory analysis were acceptable or even satisfying (Chi-square = 147.30; $p < 0.05$, GFI = 0.89, NFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.09).

Values	Indicators of measurement model
Chi ²	147.30 (P<0.01)
CMIN/ddl	3.00
GFI	0.89
AGFI	0.83
NFI	0.93
TLI	0.93
CFI	0.96
RMSEA	0.09

Table 2: Goodness of fit indices of measurement model

Table 3 shows that all average variance extracted (AVE) values were greater than 0.5, ranging from 0.5 (destination image) to 0.63 (destination distinctiveness), indicating convergent validity. Furthermore, T-values associated to each standardized factor loading were significant ($p < 0.01$). Besides, discriminant validity was confirmed, as the AVE values for each factor were greater than all squared correlations.

Constructs	Items	Standardized factor loadings	CR	AVE
Destination image	Det1	0.53	8.47	0.50
	Det2	0.66	12.69	
	Det3	0.91	25.94	
	Det4	0.56	10.35	
	Det5	0.96		
Destination distinctiveness	Dist1	0.75	11.97	0.63
	Dist2	0.84	13.70	
	Dist3	0.88	14.50	
	Dist4	0.78		
Destination familiarity	PI1	0.87	10.07	0.54
	PI2	0.89	12.14	
	PI3	0.60	10.72	
	PI4	0.69		

Table 3: CFA results

5.3 Model validation

The results of the overall structural model indicated that the model fits the data well (Chi² = 131.23; $p < 0.01$, GFI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.08).

Values	Indicators of measurement model
Chi ²	131.23 (P < 0.01)
GFI	0.90
AGFI	0.86
NFI	0.91
TLI	0.90
CFI	0.93
RMSEA	0.08

Table 4: Goodness of fit of measurement model

Confirming the findings of previous research (Lin et al. 2007; Bigne et al. 2008), it turned out that destination image influences behavioral intentions significantly ($\beta = 0.33$; $p < 0.05$). Therefore, hypothesis 1 was supported. Likewise, hypothesis 2 was retained, which emphasized the positive relationship between perceived destination distinctiveness and behavioral intentions ($\beta = 0.30$; $p < 0.05$).

Hypothesis 3, which predicts a positive relationship between destination familiarity and behavioral intentions, was also supported ($\beta = 0.39$; $p < 0.05$). This confirms for instance the findings of Alegre and Caldera (2006).

5.4 Multi-group analysis

In order to test the moderating effects of travel satisfaction, multi-group analysis was performed in the next step. The moderating variable “overall travel satisfaction” was categorized into two groups (i.e. high versus low) by dividing the scores through the median split method (Jaworski and MacInnis 1989).

For the relationship between destination image and behavioral intentions, table 5 shows a significant improvement in the X² value (131.48).

Values	Constrained model	Unconstrained model
Chi ²	241.12 (P < 0.01)	109.64 (P < 0.01)
GFI	0.90	0.90
AGFI	0.83	0.85
NFI	0.91	0.92
TLI	0.94	0.94
CFI	0.93	0.93
RMSEA	0.09	0.09
□X ²	131.48	
Sig	(P<0.01)	

Table 5: Moderating effect of satisfaction on destination image-behavioral intentions

Furthermore, the standardized parameter estimate confirmed that the influence of destination image is more effective when satisfaction is high ($\beta = 0.26, p < 0.05$) than when it is low ($\beta = 0.20, p < 0.05$). Based on this, it can be concluded that travel satisfaction moderates the relationship between destination image and behavioral intention. As a result, hypothesis 4a was supported.

With regards to the assumption that travel satisfaction moderates the relationship between destination distinctiveness and behavioral intentions, table 6 shows that the change in X^2 was also significant ($\Delta X^2 = 98.02, p < 0.01$).

Values	Constrained model	Unconstrained model
Chi ²	200.17 (P < 0.01)	102.15 (P < 0.01)
GFI	0.90	0.90
AGFI	0.87	0.87
NFI	0.92	0.91
TLI	0.93	0.90
CFI	0.90	0.90
RMSEA	0.08	0.08
ΔX^2	98.02	
Sig	(P<0.01)	

Table 6: Moderating effect of satisfaction on destination distinctiveness-behavioral intentions

The standardized parameter estimate for high travel satisfaction ($\beta = 0.33, p < 0.05$) is greater than the standardized parameter estimate for low travel satisfaction ($\beta = 0.25, P < 0.05$). Therefore, the effect of perceived destination distinctiveness on behavioral intentions is stronger when satisfaction is high than when it is low, implying that hypothesis 4b was also supported. Regarding the supposed effect of travel satisfaction on the relationship between destination familiarity and behavioral intention, Table VII indicates that the change in X^2 value (67.82) is also significant.

Values	Constrained model	Unconstrained model
Chi ²	159.42 (P < 0.01)	91.60 (P < 0.01)
GFI	0.91	0.89
AGFI	0.89	0.87
NFI	0.92	0.92
TLI	0.94	0.92
CFI	0.90	0.91
RMSEA	0.09	0.08
ΔX^2	67.82	
Sig	(P<0.01)	

Table 7: Moderating effect of satisfaction on destination familiarity-behavioral intentions

It was found that the moderating effect is stronger when satisfaction is high ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.05$) than when satisfaction is low ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < 0.05$). This means that the effect of destination familiarity on behavioral intentions is more pronounced when travel satisfaction is high (versus low). Therefore, hypothesis 4c was also retained.

6. Discussion

This study provides evidence on the moderating effects of travel satisfaction. At first sight, it might seem logical that satisfaction explains repeat visitations. However, the link between satisfaction and behavioral intentions is more complex (Dolcinar et al. 2013). For this reason, satisfaction was conceptualized as moderating variable in this study in order to address the convoluted characteristics of the relationship between satisfaction and behavioral intentions. Confirming the argumentation of Faullant et al. (2008), overall travel satisfaction might in this context be a necessary, but not sufficient condition for favorable behavioral intentions.

The findings of this study therefore demonstrate that a more detailed perspective on travel satisfaction seems to be necessary, since previous research mainly conceptualized travel satisfaction either as predictor or moderator of behavioral intentions.

These findings might not seem very surprising, but given the complexity of the satisfaction-loyalty-relationship, especially in the case of cultural heritage sites where the site's perceived attributes and the visitor's own attitude are the most important travel reasons, a detailed consideration of the effects of travel satisfaction can be very valuable.

Regarding the positive relationships between destination image and behavioral intentions, and destination distinctiveness and behavioral intentions, the empirical

model presented in this study shows that the appreciation of particular place assets (e.g. people, architecture) is likely to result in favorable behavioral intentions.

7. Managerial implications

Understanding the effects of travel satisfaction for heritage sites may help tourism marketers better target their customers.

The city of Vicenza should therefore focus on the attributes associated with its product and service offering in order to develop its destination brand based on history and tradition. Culture and entertainment affects the use of cultural events (e.g. 500th birthday festival of Palladio, Vicenza Jazz) in order to create economic and social attractiveness. For developing its destination brand distinctiveness, Vicenza should capitalize on its unique architecture. Frequent restorations and maintenance of ancient Palladian buildings are therefore undeniable for sustaining the city's charm and for reinforcing place authenticity.

The positive link between destination familiarity and behavioral intentions suggests that repeat visitors might be an important market segment for destination marketers. Even if visitors might be familiar with the city of Vicenza and its surrounding area, they are nevertheless likely to revisit the destination, especially when satisfaction is high (versus low).

8. Limitations and directions for future research

This study focused on certain constructs that affect tourists' revisit intentions at cultural heritage sites. Additional research may employ other variables such as the perceived quality of tourism services or the hospitality of local residents that could also exert an influence on travel satisfaction. The relevance of heritage-driven destination distinctiveness also needs to be explored

at other destinations. The concept of perceived cultural distinctiveness could in this context be assimilated to brand equity theory, since the empirical model of this study already suggested the positive effect of certain brand equity components (e.g. image, loyalty) on behavioral intentions. Further analyses of tourist profiles and their different likelihoods to revisit cultural heritage sites in dependence on demographic factors would also be important. A more detailed segmentation of such tourist profiles based on different propensities for (re-)visiting the city of Vicenza in dependence of exogenous variables and specific travel reasons could be relevant for further considerations of the findings. Besides, this study did not provide insights how destination image, perceived destination distinctiveness, and destination familiarity could and already have changed over time and how this could affect tourist's behavioral intentions. The temporal dimensions of tourist satisfaction already turned out to influence behavioral intentions differently over time, suggesting that the same could be valid for the variables used in the empirical model of this study.

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