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SOCIAL MEDIA AND LOCAL TOURIST INTENTIONS: COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM IN KOTA BELUD, SABAH

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ABSTRACT

Community-based tourism (CBT) is one of the key drivers of sustainable rural development, offering both economic and cultural benefits to local communities. This research explores the factors that influence local tourists' intentions to visit CBT destinations by applying the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which consists of three major aspects, including attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Additionally, this study integrates social media usage as a moderating factor within the rural tourism context of Kota Belud, Sabah. A quantitative approach was employed, using a structured survey adapted from validated TPB frameworks. The survey collected responses using a 5-point Likert scale, focusing on TPB aspects and social media usage. Data were obtained from 261 respondents via convenience sampling, with a response rate of 74.57%. Reliability was confirmed through a pilot test, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.70. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was applied to analyse TPB relationships and moderating effects. Perceived behavioural control emerged as the strongest predictor of behavioural intention, indicating the importance of logistical convenience. Subjective norms were statistically significant, highlighting how decision-making is influenced by a collectivist societal culture. Attitude showed a

weaker yet positive impact. The moderating role of social media usage was statistically insignificant, suggesting that offline influence continues to dominate in rural CBT settings

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1. Introduction

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) has increasingly gained proper recognition as a sustainable approach to rural development, focusing on community involvement, cultural preservation, and equitable resource distribution. Kota Belud, located in Sabah, Malaysia, is a region renowned for both its cultural richness and natural beauty, making it an ideal setting for CBT. Despite its potential, the full benefits of CBT in Kota Belud are largely untapped and relatively unknown, particularly with respect to understanding the behaviours and motivations of domestic tourists, who account for a significant portion of Sabah's tourism market (Sabah Tourism, 2024).

In an era where digital tools are integrated into daily routines, social media emerges as a powerful medium capable of influencing how tourists make decisions regarding their travel destinations. Platforms such as Instagram and Facebook enable tourists to discover destinations through online recommendations, shared experiences, and visually appealing content. While the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) has been widely used to understand tourist behaviour, its integration with social media remains underexplored, especially within the context of rural tourism (Ajzen, 1991; Xiang & Gretzel, 2020). This gap presents a unique opportunity for this research to examine how the dynamics of digital tools interact with the traditional TPB aspects of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control that shape tourist intentions.

Objectives of Study

- a) To determine key behavioural factors (attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control) influencing local tourists' intentions to visit CBT destinations in Kota Belud, Sabah.
- b) To determine the moderating effect of social media intensity in shaping the relationship between subjective norms and tourist intentions.

Building on this, the following section examines the theoretical underpinnings and empirical studies that guide this research. It focuses specifically on the aspect of TPB and the transformative role of social media in shaping tourist behaviour. The literature review establishes the framework required to address the study's objectives and contextualise its findings.

2. Literature Review

Community-Based Tourism

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) is increasingly being recognised as a sustainable model for rural development, as it offers both economic and cultural benefits to local communities. Unlike mass or urban tourism, CBT places greater emphasis on local governance, community participation, and the preservation of their cultural heritage (Mkwizu, 2021). It acts as a catalyst, enabling local communities to actively engage in tourism activities while empowering them to share their cultures, traditions, and practices with outsiders, all while prioritising environmental

preservation and the sustainable use of local resources (Subedi & Kubickova, 2024). These principles align well with global efforts to promote sustainable development in less-developed areas, where CBT can be utilised as an economic opportunity. CBT sites in rural areas like Kota Belud face their own set of challenges. Limited infrastructure, inadequate resources, and reliance on unofficial networks often hinders its growth. However, the genuine and authentic experience that CBT provides has made this tourism approach a desirable choice for tourists who would like to engage in sustainable travel experiences (Han et al., 2023). According to Rahmafitria and Kaswanto (2024), stakeholders' participation and the inclusion of local voices in decision-making are crucial factors that can significantly increase the likelihood of CBT success.

Attitude Towards CBT

Attitudes represent an individual's evaluation of performing a specific behaviour, shaped by the perceived outcomes (Ajzen, 1991). Within tourism studies, attitudes toward destinations are influenced by factors such as cultural authenticity, sustainability, and unique offerings (Joo et al., 2020). Research has consistently shown a strong relationship between attitudes and behavioural intentions. Han et al. (2023) and Nasir et al. (2020) both suggest that tourists are more likely to visit CBT sites when the destinations offer authentic cultural experiences and deliver benefits to the local communities involved in operating them. In the context of Kota Belud, attitudes towards CBT are likely influenced by its unique cultural offerings and strong community involvement. However, challenges such as limited marketing approaches and logistical difficulties may weaken the connection between attitude and behavioural intention (Rahmafitria & Kaswanto, 2024).

Perceived Behavioural Control Towards CBT

Perceived behavioural control refers to an individual's perception of how easy or difficult it is to perform a particular behaviour, including factors such as accessibility, affordability, and safety (Ajzen, 1991). Within tourism studies, it is a critical aspect, as it influences whether tourists will follow through with their intention to visit, despite the presence of logistical and financial constraints (Luongo et al., 2023). Rahmafitria and Kaswanto (2024) suggest that tourists are more likely to visit rural destinations when logistical options are convenient and affordable. Another study confirms that tourists are more likely to visit lesser-known CBT sites when their safety and convenience are guaranteed (Han et al., 2023). These studies emphasise how these aspects can influence local tourist intention to visit CBT sites and its importance in its understanding. For Kota Belud, logistical convenience is likely a key determinant of perceived behavioural control. Addressing these challenges could significantly enhance local tourists' perception of CBT sites in Kota Belud to increase their likelihood of visiting these authentic and appealing destinations.

Subjective Norms

Subjective norms refer to the perceived social pressures to perform or avoid certain behaviours, often shaped by family, friends, and community influences (Ajzen, 1991). In tourism studies, subjective norms can also be shaped by online reviews, social media recommendations, and cultural expectations. This is especially relevant in a collectivist society like Malaysia (Badgja et al., 2024). Previous studies have consistently proven that subjective norms are statistically significant towards behavioural intention. Kenedi et al. (2024) and Susanto et al. (2024) similarly suggest that community values and voices triumph over personal opinion, often swaying individuals to follow the influence of the majority. With social media playing a prominent role in today's era and growing human over-reliance on it, opinions and recommendations can weaken subjective norms due to the overwhelming information (Joo et al., 2020).

The Role of Social Media

Social media has undoubtedly transformed the operations of the tourism industry. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TripAdvisor allow tourists to share their thoughts and experiences online with their peers. This sharing can unintentionally influence the three aspects of TPB in shaping behavioural intentions (Joo et al., 2020). Social media usage refers to the intensity or frequency with which individuals engage with these platforms and has been identified as a valid variable for assessing the relationships between TPB aspects and behavioural intentions. Joo et al. (2020) is considered a foundational reference for this conceptual framework. Additionally, other studies have shown how social media can amplify subjective norms (Xiang & Gretzel, 2020; Kenedi et al., 2024). It is widely accepted that tourists are more likely to visit destinations that are perceived positively on social media. However, this influence can sometimes backfire and be perceived as inauthentic (Rahmafitria & Kaswanto, 2024), particularly when social media is overused, potentially leading to information overload and reduced trust toward the content being portrayed. In rural areas like Kota Belud, social media presents both opportunities and challenges. While it increases visibility for lesser-known CBT destinations, limited digital access and scepticism towards online content may weaken its overall impact. Han et al. (2023) suggest that combining authentic digital narratives with a strong emphasis on offline influence may enhance the effectiveness of social media in promoting CBT sites in Kota Belud, Sabah.

While previous studies have explored each of the TPB aspects extensively, they were mostly conducted in isolation. Few have explored this niche effect within the context of rural tourism, especially in CBT, which this study seeks to address by bridging the theoretical gap. The following section presents the research design, data collection procedures, and analytical techniques used to investigate the relationships between behavioural factors, social media usage, and tourist intentions within the CBT context in Kota Belud, Sabah.

3. Methodology

Building on insights from the literature review, this study adopts a robust quantitative approach to explore how behavioural factors influence local tourists' intentions to visit CBT destinations in Kota Belud, Sabah. The study integrates the three aspects of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) with the moderating role of social media intensity (Joo et al., 2020). These constructs were measured using a structured survey instrument, adapted for contextual relevance to Kota Belud.

The questionnaire was adapted from Joo et al. (2020), a validated instrument selected for its alignment with the TPB framework and its reliability in capturing the relevant conceptual dimensions. It was carefully modified to ensure clarity and cultural relevance for respondents from Kota Belud, considering cultural and linguistic nuances to promote accurate responses.

The questionnaire consisted of four sections. The first section collected demographic data, providing contextual understanding of respondents' characteristics and their potential influence on tourism behaviour. The second section focused on TPB aspects of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Items were adapted and refined to capture respondents' perceptions of CBT sites, social pressures, and perceived ease of visit. The third section assessed social media usage intensity, measuring how frequently and intensely respondents engaged with social platforms and its influence on decision-making. The final section focused on behavioural intention, assessing respondents' likelihood of visiting CBT sites in Kota Belud within the next year.

Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "1 = Strongly Disagree" to "5 = Strongly Agree". This scale was chosen for its simplicity and effectiveness in maintaining both reliability and validity of responses. A pilot test with 50 respondents was conducted before full-scale data collection to confirm the instrument's reliability. Cronbach's alpha values exceeded 0.70 for all constructs, indicating strong internal consistency. Minor revisions were made after the pilot to improve clarity, especially for respondents from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds.

A non-probability sampling method, specifically convenience sampling, was employed due to its practical advantages in reaching accessible respondents who met the study's criteria. The study acknowledges the potential bias associated with this approach. To mitigate this, data collection was diversified through both online surveys and on-site distribution in key tourism locations. Although the target sample was 350, the final valid sample consisted of 261 respondents after data cleaning, achieving a 74.57% response rate. Data collection was conducted over a three-month period.

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), using SmartPLS version 4.1, was employed for data analysis. Multiple analyses were performed, including reliability and validity tests, path coefficients, discriminant validity, square analysis, and bootstrapping. These results are detailed in the following section.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, their rights, and the confidentiality of their responses. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation.

This comprehensive methodological approach provides a strong foundation for data-driven insights. The next section discusses the research findings, comparisons with existing literature, and the contribution of this study to the body of knowledge.

4. Results

The data analysis revealed a range of key findings regarding the factors influencing local tourists' intentions to visit CBT destinations in Kota Belud, Sabah, using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM).

Table 1
Tabulated Summary of Respondents' Demographic Profile

Demographic	Categories	Frequency
Gender	Male	169
	Female	92
Age	20 - 29	172
	30 - 39	26
	40 - 49	23
	50 and above	40
	Family	117
Travel Companion	Friends	129
	Co-workers	8
	By Yourself	7
Educational	High School	53

Level	Vocational/Technical School	9
	Certificate/Diploma Level	34
	Bachelor's Degree	150
	Master's Degree	12
	Doctoral Degree	3
Monthly Income	Below RM 1,000	146
	RM 1,000 above	27
	RM 2,000 above	7
	RM 3,000 above	11
	RM 4,000 above	70

The gender of the demographic profile indicates that 64.8% of the total 261 respondents are predominantly male, while their female counterpart was at 35.2%, signifying that the sample for this research is male-dominated. The age profile indicates that 65.9% (172 respondents) were within the 20-29 age group. Approximately 10% (26 respondents) were aged 30–39, followed by 8.8% (23 respondents) in the 40–49 age group. Additionally, 15.3% (40 respondents) were aged 50 and above, representing a notable portion of the sample. The travel companion profile reflects the overall preferences of the respondents in terms of who they align to travel with. Out of the overall respondents, 49.4% (129 respondents) indicated a preference to travel with friends, while 44.8% (117 respondents) indicated to travel with family. A smaller sample portion of the remaining respondents showed a preference to travel with co-workers at 3.1% (8 respondents) and to travel alone at 2.7% (7 respondents). The education level of the respondents indicates a relatively well-educated sample. A majority, 57.5% (150 respondents), held a Bachelor's Degree, making it the predominant sample. High school graduates comprised the second-largest group with 20.3% (53 respondents), followed by those with a Certificate or Diploma with 13% (34 respondents). A smaller number of respondents held a Master's degree is 4.6% (12 respondents), while 1.1% (3 respondents) had completed a Doctoral degree. The remaining 3.4% (9 respondents) had attended only vocational/technical schools. Regarding monthly income, the data shows that 55.9% (146 respondents) earned below RM1,000 per month, representing the predominant group in this research. 10.3% (27 respondents) earned between RM1,000 and RM2,000, while 2.7% (7 respondents) earned between RM2,000 and RM3,000. 4.2% (11 respondents) earned between RM3,000 and RM4,000, and 26.8% (70 respondents) earned above RM4,000 per month.

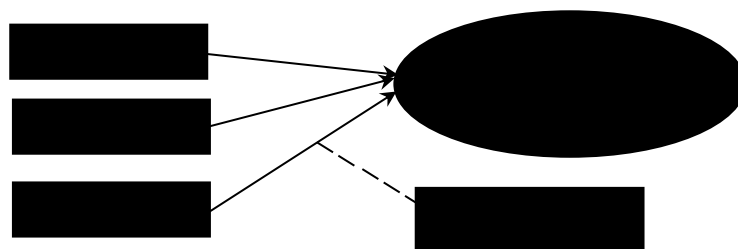


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Implemented for this study. (Azjen, 1991)

The path coefficient between Attitude (ATD) and Intention to Visit (INT) indicates a weak positive relationship of 0.045. This suggests that, although tourists' attitudes toward CBT are connected to their intention to visit, the strength of this relationship is minimal. For Perceived Behavioural Control (PBC), the relationship with INT is moderately positive at 0.399, indicating a significant contribution to the intention to visit. Similarly, Subjective Norms (SJN) show a moderate positive relationship

with INT at 0.315, suggesting a notable influence. On the other hand, the relationship between Social Media Usage (SMU) and SJN reveals a very weak negative coefficient of -0.043. This implies that increased intensity of SMU slightly reduces the effect of SJN on INT. The reliability of the measured constructs is supported by the item loadings. INT has a range of 0.871 to 0.911, indicating strong reliability in measuring the construct. ATD shows a range from 0.537 to 0.889, reflecting variable reliability across its four items. PBC scores range from 0.789 to 0.849, while SJN scores range from 0.828 to 0.923, both suggesting strong internal consistency. SMU shows similar variability to ATD, with scores ranging from 0.482 to 0.857. Notably, SMU had the lowest reliability.

Table 2

The Overview Analysis Readings of Aspect Reliability and Validity

Aspect	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability		Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
		(rho_a)	(rho_c)	
ATD (Attitude)	0.755	0.846	0.832	0.564
PBC (Perceived Behavioural Control)	0.848	0.849	0.898	0.688
SJN (Subjective Norms)	0.898	0.902	0.929	0.766
SMU (Social Media Usage)	(0.594)	0.737	0.743	(0.430)
INT (Tourists Visiting Intention of CBT in Kota Belud)	0.929	0.929	0.946	0.778

For the reading of Average Variance Extracted (AVE), the ATD aspect observed an AVE of 0.755, indicating an acceptable reliability. The PBC aspect recorded a higher AVE of 0.848, indicating strong reliability and internal consistency. Similarly, SJN observed an AVE of 0.898, also indicating strong internal consistency. The INT variable had the highest AVE at 0.929, indicating excellent reliability and internal consistency. However, the SMU aspect recorded an AVE of 0.594, suggesting moderate reliability and internal consistency, slightly below the recommended threshold (Henseler et al., 2016; Sarstedt et al., 2021; & Hair et al., 2022). In terms of Composite Reliability (CR), the ATD aspect recorded a CR of 0.832, indicating a strong reliability level. The PBC and SJN aspects observed even higher CR values of 0.898 and 0.929, respectively, while the INT variable recorded excellent reliability with a CR of 0.946. For the SMU aspect, its CR reading was recorded at 0.737, which statistically compensates for its low AVE reading, supporting its acceptable reliability level and ensuring its inclusion in the model (Hair et al., 2022; Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 3
The Overview Analysis Readings of Discriminant Validity - Fornell-Larkcer

Aspects	ATD	PBC	SJN	SMU	INT
ATD	0.751	0.712	0.594	0.354	0.6
PBC	0.712	0.829	0.707	0.343	0.733
SJN	0.594	0.707	0.875	0.352	0.704
SMU	0.354	0.343	0.352	0.743	0.465
INT	0.6	0.733	0.704	0.465	0.882

For ATD, the square root of its AVE is 0.751, which is higher than its correlations with PBC at 0.712, SJN at 0.594, SMU at 0.354, and INT at 0.600. This indicates that the ATD aspect meets the Fornell-Larcker criterion. For PBC, the square root of its AVE is 0.829, exceeding its correlations with ATD at 0.712, SJN at 0.707, SMU at 0.343, and INT at 0.733. These results provide evidence of the discriminant validity of the PBC aspect. As for SJN, the square root of its AVE is 0.875, which is greater than its correlations with ATD at 0.594, PBC at 0.707, SMU at 0.352, and INT at 0.704. This finding further supports the discriminant validity of the SJN aspect. The SMU aspect has an AVE of 0.430, which, as presented in Table 3.10.1.1, falls below the commonly recommended threshold of 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). However, the square root of its AVE is 0.743, which exceeds its correlations with ATD at 0.354, PBC at 0.343, and SJN at 0.352. Thus, the SMU construct satisfies the Fornell-Larcker criterion, indicating adequate discriminant validity. Lastly for INT, the square root of its AVE is 0.882, which is higher than its correlations with all other constructs, including ATD at 0.600, PBC at 0.733, SJN at 0.704, and SMU at 0.465. This confirms that the INT aspect meets the discriminant validity requirements.

Table 4
The Overview Analysis Readings of Discriminant Validity – HTMT

Aspects	ATD	PBC	SJN	SMU	SMU X SJN	INT
ATD		0.798	0.692	0.483	0.358	0.657
PBC	0.798		0.809	0.425	0.206	0.824
SJN	0.692	0.809		0.405	0.285	0.770
SMU	0.483	0.425	0.405		0.261	0.535
SMU X SJN	0.358	0.206	0.285	0.261		0.301
INT	0.657	0.824	0.770	0.535	0.301	

The Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) value between ATD and PBC is 0.798, and between ATD and SJN is 0.692, both of which indicate fall within the statistically acceptable range. The relationship between PBC and SJN recorded an HTMT value of 0.809, while PBC and SMU recorded a value of 0.425, both confirming discriminant validity. The HTMT values for SMU with other aspects are relatively low: 0.405 with SJN, 0.425 with PBC, and 0.535 with INT, indicating that SMU is distinct within the conceptual model. SMU's interaction with other aspects showed low HTMT values: 0.358 with ATD, 0.206 with PBC, and 0.301 with INT, further supporting its discriminant

validity. The relationship between INT and other aspects are also within an acceptable range, with HTMT values of 0.657 with ATD, 0.824 with PBC, and 0.770 with SJN.

Table 5
The Overview of R^2 (Explained Variance) and f^2 (Effect Size)

Aspects	R^2	R^2 Adjusted	f^2
ATD	-	-	0.003
PBC	-	-	0.165
SJN	-	-	0.132
SMU	-	-	0.085
SMU X SJN	-	-	0.007
INT	0.645	0.638	-

The R^2 (coefficient of determination) value for INT was recorded at 0.645, with an adjusted R^2 of 0.638, indicating that the predictor variables collectively explain 64.5% of the variance in INT. As for the f^2 (effect size) values: ATD recorded an f^2 of 0.003, indicating a negligible effect size. PBC recorded an f^2 value of 0.165, indicating a medium effect size. Similarly, SJN recorded an f^2 value of 0.132, also indicating a medium effect size. SMU recorded an f^2 value of 0.085, indicating a small effect size.

Table 6
Path Coefficient - Means, STDEV, T Values and p Values

Aspects	Original Sampling (O)	Sampling Mean (M)	Standard Dev. (STDEV)	T-Statistics	P Values
ATD > INT	0.045	0.044	0.053	0.855	0.196
PBC > INT	0.039	0.398	0.073	5.433	0.000
SJN > INT	0.315	0.316	0.069	4.590	0.000
SMU > INT	0.190	0.193	0.045	4.204	0.000
SMU x SJN > INT	-0.043	-0.040	0.036	1.200	0.115

The path coefficient for ATD towards INT was recorded at 0.045 with a T-value of 0.855 and a p-value of 0.196, indicating a weak and statistically insignificant relationship. For PBC, the path coefficient towards INT was 0.398, with a T-value of 5.433 and a p-value of 0.000, indicating a strong and statistically significant relationship. The path coefficient for SJN towards INT recorded at 0.315, with a T-value of 4.590 and a p-value of 0.000, indicating a moderate and statistically significant relationship. As for SMU towards INT, the path coefficient was 0.190, with a T-value of 4.204 and a p-value of 0.000, indicating a moderate and statistically significant relationship. The interaction term of SJN with SMU towards INT recorded a path coefficient of -0.043, with a T-value of 1.200 and a p-value of 0.115, indicating a weak and negative relationship, which is statistically insignificant.

Building on these findings, the following section delves into their implications, connecting the results to the theoretical framework and practical applications. The discussion explores how the identified behavioural drivers and the nuanced role of social media can inform strategies to promote sustainable rural tourism and foster community engagement in Kota Belud.

5. Discussion

The findings not only confirm the applicability of TPB in this context but also highlight the novel role of social media as a moderating factor, albeit with varying degrees of influence. Integrating established behavioural theories with contemporary digital dynamics offers a fresh perspective on understanding rural tourism development in culturally rich yet under-represented settings.

Attitude as a Weak Predictor Towards CBT

Though the result indicates a statistically positive link, attitude demonstrated a weaker influence compared to the other two major aspects. This finding deviates slightly from previous studies that emphasise attitude as a strong driver towards behavioural intentions within the tourism context (Joo et al., 2020; Han et al., 2023). In the context of CBT in Kota Belud, this result may be attributed to limited marketing efforts and logistical challenges, which can dilute and disrupt positive attitudes towards CBT sites (Rahmafitria & Kaswanto, 2024). However, attitude remains an important aspect that cannot be overlooked. Local tourists' positive views of CBT and its inherent authenticity still play a significant role in shaping their intentions. Stakeholders should consider enhancing their approach towards both digital and offline influence to properly promote Kota Belud CBT and its offerings.

Perceived Behavioural Control as a Strong Predictor Towards CBT

Emerging as the highest and most substantial statistical influence on local tourists' behavioural intentions, perceived behavioural control aligns with prior studies that highlight the importance of accessibility, affordability, and safety in shaping travel behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Han et al., 2023). However, in the Kota Belud case, the results present practical challenges associated with rural tourism, such as limited infrastructure and safety concerns. According to Rahmafitria and Kaswanto (2024), improving logistical convenience is crucial to enhancing local tourists' perceived control, which in turn can attract more visitors to lesser-known CBT destinations. It is interpreted that the challenges stated should be addressed accordingly, thus tourism stakeholders should prioritise initiatives to ensure logistical convenience is adequate, safe, and affordable in order to increase local tourists' confidence and willingness to explore rural areas like Kota Belud.

Subjective Norms Influence towards CBT

The findings for this aspect indicate a substantial positive link, which is the second strongest after perceived behavioural control in this study. Such a significant influence highlights the importance of peer influence, social expectations, and community dynamics in a collectivist society, where decisions are shaped by family, friends, and cultural norms (Bagdja et al., 2024; Kenedi et al., 2024). This result also underscores the role of offline influence within the CBT context. Social pressures communicated through word-of-mouth appear more dominant than digital influence (Han et al., 2023). Interestingly, the moderating effect of social media was found to be minimal and statistically insignificant, despite expectations that it would amplify subjective norms. This suggests a more nuanced view, that social media may not strongly influence subjective norms in this setting. Instead, its impact may be tempered by information overload and scepticism towards curated online content (Rahmafitria & Kaswanto, 2024). Such findings require a re-evaluation of digital marketing approaches. A more authentic, community-driven narrative may be necessary to effectively leverage social media in promoting CBT activities.

Social Media Influence as a Moderating Factor

Social media usage does indeed influence behavioural intention when reviewed from a direct relationship perspective, highlighting its importance in modern tourism. Nevertheless, its limited moderating effect on subjective norms indicates the complexities of digital influence. While social media has the potential to amplify subjective norms through online reviews, sharing, and recommendations (Xiang & Gretzel, 2020), the overall impact appears to be statistically insignificant in the rural context of Kota Belud, where offline influence remains dominant. The slightly lower AVE observed in the findings suggests how local tourists view and engage with digital platform at various levels. Contributing factors may include content scepticism, information overload, and the digital divide, all of which are common in rural areas and very likely contribute to the reduced impact of social media. According to Han et al. (2023), combining authentic digital narratives with offline community influence is essential to optimising the effectiveness of social media. Despite these limitations, social media remains a valuable tool to increase visibility of lesser-known CBT destinations. Based on these findings, partnering with local influencers and encouraging user-generated content could potentially enhance the perceived credibility of social media campaigns and emphasise the digital reach, helping to bridge the gap between digital and offline influence.

Novelty of the Research

This academic endeavour extends the TPB framework by integrating social media usage as a moderating factor, offering a fresh perspective on the interaction between traditional behavioural constructs and modern digital tools. While previous studies have traditionally explored the individual effects of TPB, few have examined the combined influence of its variables within the CBT context (Joo et al., 2020; Susanto et al., 2024).

This research helps bridge that theoretical gap by providing valuable insights specific to the culturally rich and geographically unique setting of Kota Belud. It also explores the nuanced role of social media in rural tourism, challenging the assumption that digital platforms inherently amplify social influences. The findings from this specific context underscore the importance of contextual factors in interpreting tourism behaviour.

Moreover, this study places a strong emphasis on local tourists, offering perspectives that are often overlooked in favour of international markets. By examining the unique motivations and challenges faced by local tourists in Kota Belud, the research contributes actionable insights for CBT promotion and sustainability strategies. These findings enrich the broader discourse on niche tourism research and provide valuable, context-specific knowledge that can inform future studies.

6. Conclusion

The research explores and determines the influence of social media on local tourists' intentions towards CBT in Kota Belud, Sabah, using TPB as a foundational framework. By focusing on the three primary TPB aspects and incorporating social media usage as a moderating factor, the research provides valuable insights into how various factors dynamically shape local tourist intentions within the culturally and geographically unique context of CBT. Overall, the findings reaffirm the relevance of TPB aspects in shaping behavioural intentions while also revealing the context-specific nuances of social media usage. The study provides unique and actionable insights, which are further concluded in the theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in extending the applicability of TPB to rural tourism studies, particularly in the CBT context. It reinforces the robustness of TPB aspects in predicting human behavioural intention, especially in culturally rich, geographically unique, and collectivist societal settings. Additionally, the integration of social media as a moderating factor addresses theoretical gaps in the literature regarding the digital roles in influencing human behavioural intentions. This integration provides valuable, nuanced contextual findings that are significant in shaping the role of social media in the tourism field. This research focuses more on the local tourists rather than their international counterparts, helping to provide a more localised perspective on tourism behaviour. It addresses specific motivations and challenges unique to local tourists, which is relevant towards sustainable development and the need to balance global trends with local priorities.

The practical contribution of this study lies in the aspect that can be made into actionable strategies to support CBT promotion and marketing. Stakeholders must prioritise the logistical convenience of local tourists to enhance their perceived behavioural control and willingness to visit. Stakeholders should also collaborate with local influencers, community leaders, and local tourists to amplify positive perception through word-of-mouth recommendations, creating engaging opportunities to attract potential tourists and encourage repeat visits. This also highlights the need to balance online and offline influences. A hybrid approach to marketing and promotion is most effective in a rural tourism context, where integrated efforts are only impactful if both approaches are combined properly. Although social media has a limited moderating role, its direct influence on behaviour identifies it as a potential tool for promoting. In addition to adopting a hybrid approach, stakeholders should optimise social media usage in a way that aligns with the cultural and experiential CBT destination values.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, the study acknowledges several limitations. The geographical scope, focusing exclusively on Kota Belud, limits the generalisability of the findings to other rural areas. Another limitation relates to the digital gap, which was evident in this research within the rural context. Furthermore, the data were collected at a single point in time, offering only a brief insight into tourist behaviour, along with the methodological constraints of lower AVE readings. Future research should expand the focus to include other rural areas or international counterparts to enhance generalisability and explore cultural differences. Examine differences within the digital literature and implement a longitudinal approach to provide deeper insights over time. Moreover, refine measurement models to improve data robustness. Lastly, to use additional or unique moderating variables to provide a more comprehensive understanding of tourism behaviour and refine the theoretical framework.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest occurred in the making of this publication.

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