
PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF RESIDENTS' SUPPORT FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: A SERIAL MEDIATION MODEL

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ABSTRACT

Based on the Theory of Planned Behavior and the Stimulus-Organism-Response model, the aim of this paper is to determine the role of the organism (subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and attitudes towards supporting sustainable tourism development) as a mediator in the relationship between stimuli (perceived empowerment and place attachment) and the response (intention to support sustainable tourism development). The stratified sample included 243 respondents from rural areas of Southern and Eastern Serbia, who are employed or provide services within the tourism sector. Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to test the proposed model and research hypotheses. The obtained results confirmed the existence of positive and statistically significant mediating roles between the observed variables. This findings can contribute to a better understanding of the process through which psychological and social factors can shape residents' intentions to support the development of sustainable rural tourism.

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Introduction

Rural tourism has a significant role in improving the modernization of agriculture and the development of rural areas, strengthening the connection between urban and rural areas, as well as in reducing poverty in underdeveloped regions. As an important segment of the tourism industry, it is based on the use of rural resources, including agricultural practices, landscapes, local traditions and specificities of the territory, which motivate tourists to visit rural areas, participate in different activities and gain new experiences. Thanks to the preserved natural environment and rich traditional heritage with pronounced local characteristics, rural areas can meet the needs of various tourists, especially the urban population seeking rest, relaxation and familiarization with cultural and historical contents, which is why they are becoming an increasingly important destination in the context of modern tourism (Wang et al., 2022). Rural tourism is an important segment of integrated sustainable development, both at the local and regional levels, as well as at the national level. Relevant literature suggests that the exchange of experiences and good practices leads to the conclusion that rural tourism in Serbia can contribute to increasing tourism activity and creating new jobs, reducing unemployment, diversifying the rural economy, as well as preserving and improving natural and cultural resources, while revitalizing rural areas (Borović et al., 2022; Pantić et al., 2026; Lakićević, 2020). Considering the significant potential of the Republic of Serbia for the development of various forms of rural tourism, Cvijanović and Ružić (2017) emphasize that tourism, as an important tertiary economic activity, together with agriculture as the main primary activity, can be seen as a locomotive that drives the development of rural areas. Lukić et al. (2020) indicate that the development of tourism in rural areas can contribute to broader local development by stimulating economic activity and valorizing the resources available to the local community.

The increased demand for tourist services in rural areas allows the residents to generate additional income through the sale of products and the provision of various services (Lazović et al., 2024; Nedeljković et al., 2022). Milićević et al. (2020) believe that in order to create effective strategies and policies aimed at increasing the competitiveness and sustainable development of tourist destinations, it is necessary to take into account the attitudes and perceptions of residents about tourism.

Despite the economic benefits, tourism development can pose a number of social and environmental challenges for the local community. This primarily concerns the rising cost of living, traffic congestion, overcrowding, and jobs characterized by low wages and poor working conditions (Telfer and Sharpley, 2015). In the case of Western Serbia, Panić et al. (2023) found that, in addition to positive economic and cultural effects, rural tourism also generates negative environmental consequences, with more than 60% of respondents reporting environmental degradation, such as increased pollution and habitat loss. Respondents highlighted the need for more responsible and environmentally sound tourism practices. These challenges, according to Yfantidou and Matarazzo (2017), are more pronounced in contexts with weaker institutional capacities, where the benefits of tourism often accrue to privileged groups, while local communities bear most of the social, cultural and environmental costs.

Such circumstances often lead to negative reactions of residents to the development of tourism. For example, resident protests in Bali due to water supply problems and the erosion of cultural identity (Suyadnya et al., 2025) or opposition to the commercialization of traditional religious and cultural practices in Vietnam (Quang et al., 2022). In response to these challenges, increasing attention is focused on the concept of sustainable tourism development, which seeks to balance economic benefits with environmental protection and socio-cultural development of local communities (Dias et al., 2024; Janković & Golubović, 2025). Nevertheless, the successful achievement of sustainable development goals requires the active involvement of local communities and the population in the processes of management, planning and promotion, although such initiatives of public institutions are often met with reservations by residents who often perceive them as an instrument for realizing the interests of tourists or local elites, rather than the wider community (Dias et al., 2024; Rastegar and Ruhanen, 2022). The sustainable development of tourism implies the adoption of a new social pattern that is in line with the principles of a sustainable way of life, where one of the biggest challenges for its realization can be seen precisely in this change of paradigm (Sharpley, 2000).

Tran et al. (2026) suggested that previous research points to several important gaps in the understanding of residents' support for sustainable tourism development. Most of the empirical studies were conducted in developed countries, while the contexts of developing countries are significantly less represented in the literature (Agarwal et al., 2024). Telfer and Sharpley (2015) point out that, given the specific characteristics of these environments, such as greater economic dependence on local resources, more sensitive ecosystems and less developed governance mechanisms, findings from developed countries cannot be fully generalized to developing countries.

In addition, a significant part of the research is based on Social Exchange Theory (SET) as the primary theoretical framework (Mihalic, 2016), introduced by Homans (1961). This framework assumes that residents' support depends on their assessment of whether the benefits of tourism outweigh the costs. However, the benefit-cost ratio cannot capture residents' attitudes and experiences in tourism destinations (Sharpley, 2014; Wang and Pfister, 2008; Deery et al., 2012). Empirical findings confirm that residents recognize the positive effects of tourism on their community, but still oppose its further development or exhibit behavior that indicates resistance (McKercher et al., 2015; Rosić, & Vilma Getman, 2025; Martín et al., 2018; Cardoso and Silva, 2018). In some cases, such support may stem more from economic necessity than from a truly positive assessment of the effects of tourism, especially in contexts where tourism is a key source of livelihood (Telfer and Sharpley, 2015). Furthermore, SET often fails to take into account psychological, cultural, and contextual factors that may influence residents' responses (Šegota et al., 2024), and the relevant literature increasingly advocates an approach that distinguishes between individual and collective levels of influence (Deery et al., 2012; Ćurčić et al., 2025; Sharpley, 2014). Recent research, particularly in the context of developing countries, emphasizes the importance of psychological and social factors and argues for theoretical frameworks that go beyond SET (Agarwal et al., 2024). Tran et al. (2026), for example, based their research on Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model.

Evaluating costs and benefits through Social Exchange Theory is not sufficient to fully explain local community behavior. Therefore, in this research, using the methodology of the authors Tran et al. (2026), implements a hybrid framework linking the TPB (Ajzen, 1991) and the S-O-R model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Such an integration can solve the problem of the inability of TPB to fully explain the origin of human attitudes (Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, 2010). Through the S-O-R paradigm, the process is mapped in more detail: external stimuli directly influence the internal psychological state of the individual, which then generates the ultimate behavioral response.

In the integrated model, the empowerment of the local population and their attachment to the place are seen as external variables that determine the attitudes of the locals towards the sustainable development of tourism. Although the literature confirms that both concepts influence the perception of tourism (Strzelecka et al., 2017), their inter-relationship and direct contribution to supporting sustainable tourism initiatives have not yet been thoroughly investigated (Aleshinloye et al., 2022). The model starts from the premise that these factors modify the basic components of the Theory of Planned Behavior (attitudes, subjective norms and perceived control of behavior), which ultimately directs residents' intention to support sustainable tourism.

The theoretical contribution of the research is reflected in a better understanding of the psychological mechanisms that influence residents' support for sustainable tourism development, while the results can provide useful guidelines to decision makers and destination management organizations for more effective inclusion of local residents in tourism planning and development processes.

Materials and methods

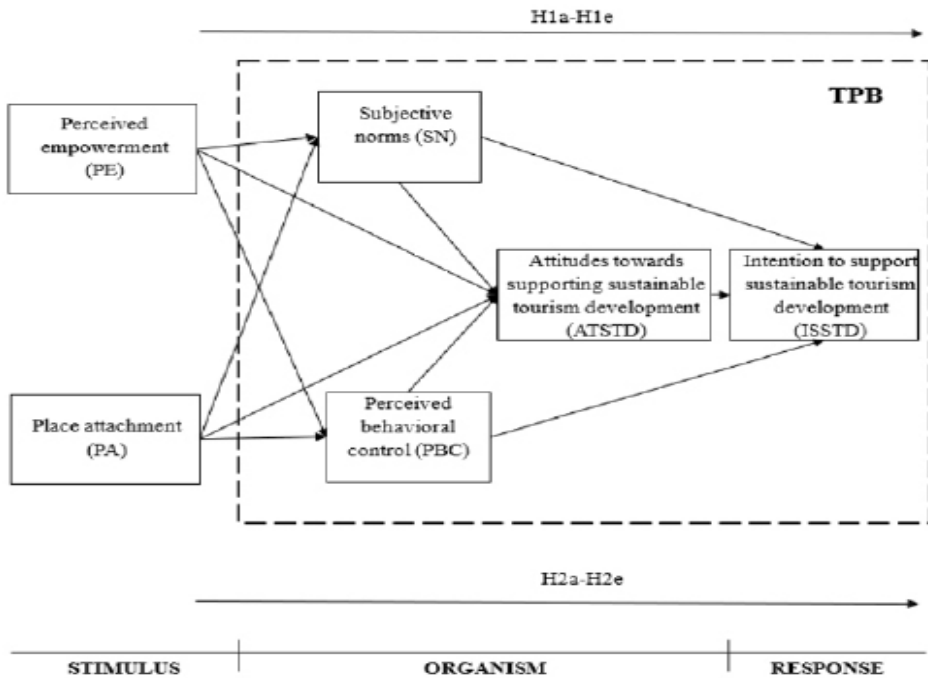
Based on the S-O-R model, external stimuli are defined as factors that influence an individual's internal psychological states and thus direct his or her reactions and behavior (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). The key psychological stimuli, in this research, are perceived empowerment (PE) and place attachment (PA). Perceived empowerment (PE) represents the way in which residents experience their own, but also shared power, as well as the opportunities that arise from their participation in tourism activities at the local community level (Agazamani and Hunt, 2017; Boley & McGehee, 2014). In the research, it is conceptualized as a first-order construct. The concept of place attachment (PA) refers to the emotional attachment that individuals develop towards places (locations) that have special meaning and significance for them (Relph, 1976). This concept was also conceptualized in the research as a first-order construct.

Within the S-O-R model, the organism involves internal cognitive and emotional processes that mediate between external stimuli and the individual's final reactions (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). In this research, the constructs of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), i.e. attitudes towards supporting sustainable tourism development (ATSTD), subjective norms (SN) and perceived behavioral control (PBC) are considered as components of the organism. Subjective norms refer to residents' perception of social expectations and pressures that can encourage support for sustainable tourism development. Perceived behavioral control can be defined as individuals' assessment of their own abilities and possibilities to participate in and influence activities related to the development of sustainable tourism. Attitudes towards

supporting the sustainable development of tourism reflect the residents' overall positive or negative evaluation of involvement in activities that contribute to its improvement (Tran et al., 2026). The responses represent the final outcome of the process in which external stimuli, through the internal psychological states of the individual, influence his behavior (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). In this research, the responses, were, similarly to Tran et al. (2026), operationalized through the residents' intention to support sustainable tourism development (ISSTD), which represents their willingness to actively support activities and initiatives aimed at sustainable tourism development.

Based on the methodology applied by Tran et al. (2026) in their study of urban tourism in Vietnam, this study examines the role of SN, PBC, and ATSTD as mediators in the relationships between PE and ISSTD and PA and ISSTD (Figure 1). The novelty of the paper is that the interrelationships between the observed variables are measured in the context of rural tourism in Serbia.

Figure 1. A conceptual model



Source: Authors, based on Tran et al. (2026)

Earlier research indicates a statistically significant relationship between psychological empowerment and residents' support for tourism development, as well as the significant role of subjective norms, attitudes towards sustainable tourism development and perceived behavioral control in residents' behavioral intentions to support sustainable tourism development (dos Santos et al., 2024; Gautam & Bhalla, 2024; Ribeiro et al., 2017; Shafieisabet & Haratifard, 2020; Strzelecka et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2022). Accordingly, the following hypotheses are defined:

H1a-e: Subjective norms (SN), attitudes towards sustainable tourism development (ATSTD) and perceived behavioral control (PBC) are significant mediators of the relationship between perceived empowerment (PE) and intention to support sustainable tourism development (ISSTD).

The results of earlier research indicate a positive association between place attachment and their intention to support sustainable tourism development, social norms, attitudes towards sustainable tourism development and perceived behavioral control (Soopramanien et al., 2023; Styliadis, 2018). Accordingly, the following hypotheses were defined:

H2a-e: Subjective norms (SN), attitudes towards sustainable tourism development (ATSTD) and perceived behavioral control (PBC) are significant mediators of the relationship between place attachment (PA) and intention to support sustainable tourism development (ISSTD).

For the purposes of the research, a questionnaire consisting of 4 parts was structured. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions, closed and multiple-choice questions, related to the demographic structure of the respondents (gender, age, level of education and career in tourism (restaurant/food store, tourist guide services, selling souvenirs/local products, transportation services and others). The second part of the questionnaire contained 10 items related to stimuli, of which 6 items related to PE, and 4 items to PA. The third part of the questionnaire was related to the organism and consisted of 9 items, whereby the constructs SN, ATSTD and PBC were measured with three items each. The fourth part of the questionnaire consisted of 3 items that related to the answer, that is, to the ISSTD construct. All views are taken from Tran et al. (2015). Each of the constructs was viewed as a first-order construct, as the arithmetic mean of the attitudes that made up each of the constructs. The research was conducted in the period March 2025 to November 2025. Questionnaires were distributed personally. Attitudes were measured using a Likert scale (1 - absolutely disagree, 5 - absolutely agree). A stratified sample included 243 respondents, from rural areas of Southern and Eastern Serbia, who are employed in tourism or provide tourism-related services.

Data were processed using IBM SPSS 23 and SmartPLS 4.0 software, by structural equation modeling using the partial least squares method (PLS-SEM). This technique is most recommended when the research focus is on predicting and investigating the dependent variables, for the maximum variance explained. Thus, PLS-SEM is the best prediction-oriented approach (Roldán and Sánchez-Franco, 2012). Also, it can simultaneously handle both measurement (external) and structural (internal) models. Furthermore, PLS-SEM is an appropriate approach for analyzing complex path models (Hair et al., 2016). PLS-SEM can also be used for small sample size and provide more accurate results.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary analysis

When dealing with survey studies, in cases where data are collected from a single source (Podsakoff et al., 2003), the issue of the presence of common method variance (CMV) can be a significant problem. To determine the presence of CMV among variables, a

one-factor test, proposed by Harman (1976), was conducted. The result showed that all attitudes in the model were categorized into 6 factors, with the first factor explaining 30.12% of the total variance, which is less than 50% (Hair et al., 2016). In addition, a collinearity assessment test was conducted in SmartPLS. It is a modern and more reliable approach, as suggested by Kock (2015) and recommended by various social science researchers (Zafar et al., 2020). All VIF values are less than the threshold value of 3, indicating that common method bias is not a problem in the model (Kock, 2015).

Measurement model

The results of evaluating the measurement model showed that the composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha (CA) values were above 0.70, i.e. critical value level, proposed by Cohen (1988). The standardized value of the loading factor of all constructs' attitudes is above 0.70, while the average extracted variance (AVE) of all constructs is above 0.50, which are adequate values. Validity and reliability results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Evaluation of measurement model evaluation

Constructs	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Perceived empowerment (PE)		0.711	0.922	0.663
PE1	0.814			
PE2	0.755			
PE3	0.823			
PE4	0.844			
PE5	0.887			
PE6	0.721			
Place attachment (PA)		0.799	0.855	0.598
PA1	0.706			
PA2	0.738			
PA3	0.863			
PA4	0.777			
Subjective norms (SN)		0.831	0.891	0.731
SN1	0.865			
SN2	0.810			
SN3	0.888			
Attitudes towards supporting sustainable tourism development (ATSTD)		0.766	0.835	0.627
ATSTD1	0.767			
ATSTD2	0.815			
ATSTD3	0.793			
Perceived behavioral control (PBC)		0.719	0.891	0.732
PBC1	0.890			
PBC2	0.854			
PBC3	0.822			
Intention to support sustainable tourism development (ISSTD)		0.803	0.853	0.659

Constructs	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
ISSTD1	0.798			
ISSTD2	0.831			
ISSTD3	0.806			

Source: Authors

Discriminant validity means that each construct is divergent in relation to other constructs, which were used in the model (Sarstedt et al., 2017). Two methods were used to assess discriminant validity: 1) the Fornell-Larcker criterion, which suggests that the value of the square root of AVE must be greater than the correlation value between the proposed constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) and 2) the HTMT ratio - Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio, which indicates whether the defined constructs are sufficiently different from each other, that is, whether they describe different phenomena (Henseler et al., 2015). Values of the HTMT coefficient below 0.85 do not indicate a problem of discriminant validity, while values above 0.85 describe problems with discriminant validity (Sarstedt et al., 2017). Detailed results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Discriminant validity

Construct	Fornell-Larcker						HTMT					
	PE	PA	SN	ATSTD	PBC	ISSTD	PE	PA	SN	ATSTD	PBC	ISSTD
PE	.814											
PA	.285	.773					.499					
SN	.444	.387	.855				.660	.588				
ATSTD	.379	.331	.420	.792			.477	.555	.514			
PBC	.417	.291	.261	.304	.856		.695	.439	.483	.580		
ISSTD	.476	.318	.381	.374	.741	.812	.705	.688	.477	.566	.758	

Source: Authors

Structural model

The structural model was assessed in terms of its fit to the data, explanatory and predictive power, and testing of the hypotheses. The model fit is satisfactory, as confirmed by the SRMR value of 0.020, which is below the recommended threshold of 0.08. The explanatory power of the model was assessed based on the coefficient of determination (R^2), whose value for the endogenous variable ISSTD is 0.591, indicating a moderate to high explanatory power of the model. The predictive relevance of the model was assessed using the Stone-Geisser Q^2 , whose value of 0.237 confirms the existence of predictive relevance and indicates a medium level of predictive ability of the model (Hair et al., 2019).

According to the research results, shown in Table 1, SN ($\beta=0.316$; $p < 0.05$), ATSTD ($\beta=0.302$; $p < 0.05$) and PBC ($\beta=0.161$; $p < 0.05$) are significant mediators of the relationship between PE and ISSTD. In addition, it was also confirmed that SN ($\beta=0.168$; $p < 0.05$), ATSTD ($\beta=0.267$; $p < 0.05$) and PBC ($\beta=0.272$; $p < 0.05$) mediate the relationship between PA and ISSTD. In addition, it was confirmed that the mediation

path through SN and ATSTD ($\beta=0.094$; $p < 0.05$), as well as through PBC and ATSTD ($\beta=0.138$; $p < 0.05$) is positive and significant in the relationship between PE and ISSTD. Also, the serial indirect effect through SN and ATSTD ($\beta=0.162$; $p < 0.05$), as well as through PBC and ATSTD ($\beta=0.150$; $p < 0.05$) positively and significantly mediates the relationship between PA and ISSTD. The significance of the role of mediators, that is, of all indirect effects, is also confirmed by the fact that the bootstrap confidence intervals of each of the observed relationships did not include zero.

Table 3. Hypothesis testing results

H	Path	OS	SM	Std	T	P
H1a	PE→SN→ISSTD	.316	.313	.050	6.344	.0001
H1b	PE→ATSTD→ISSTD	.302	.302	.050	6.090	.0001
H1c	PE→PBC→ISSTD	.161	.158	.062	2.599	.009
H1d	PE→SN→ATSTD→ISSTD	.094	.094	.043	2.209	.027
H1e	PE→PBC→ATSTD→ISSTD	.138	.135	.070	1.970	.049
H2a	PA→SN→ISSTD	.168	.168	.054	3.126	.002
H2b	PA→ATSTD→ISSTD	.267	.264	.054	4.942	.0001
H2c	PA→PBC→ISSTD	.272	.272	.069	3.918	.0001
H2d	PA→SN→ATSTD→ISSTD	.162	.159	.045	3.612	.0001
H2e	PA→PBC→ATSTD→ISSTD	.150	.147	.062	2.399	.016

Source: Authors

Based on the obtained results, it can be concluded that the intentions of residents to support the sustainable development of tourism are strengthened, both through attitudes towards sustainable development, and through subjective norms and processes based on perceived behavioral control. Similar results were obtained by Tran et al. (2026), who also determined the significant role of attitudes and subjective norms, however, according to their findings, perceived behavioral control is significant only when it is a serial mediation, i.e. when, together with attitudes towards sustainable development, it mediates the relationship between perceived improvement or place attachment and intention to support sustainable tourism development. These results complement the existing literature dealing with sustainable development issues in both developed (Gautam, 2023; Gautam & Bhalla, 2024) and developing countries (Gautam, 2023; Phuc & Nguyen, 2023; Wani et al., 2024), contributing to a better understanding of the mechanism through which perceived empowerment and place attachment can lead to residents' intentions to support sustainable development.

Conclusions

The aim of this research was to examine how perceived empowerment and place attachment shape residents' intentions to support sustainable tourism development through subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and attitudes towards supporting sustainable tourism development.

The results indicated the importance of all mediation paths, thus confirming the defined hypotheses of the research. The conducted research connects two theoretical

frameworks (TPB and S-O-R) whose application is not so common in research supporting the sustainable development of tourism, especially when it comes to rural tourism research. For this reason, the current research provides a more comprehensive explanation of the residents' intention formation process.

Given that the majority of previous studies were conducted in developed countries, the results of this research contribute to filling the gap in the literature by providing empirical evidence from Serbia, as a developing country. In this way, the applicability of the integrated TPB and S-O-R model is confirmed in different socioeconomic and institutional conditions, which improves the possibility of generalization of the existing theoretical assumptions. The obtained results show that the support of residents does not depend only on their feeling of empowerment or connection with the place, but also on whether a supportive environment for sustainable tourism development is formed through social norms and positive attitudes. It can help decision-makers to create policies that strengthen local residents' involvement, sense of community and positive attitudes towards sustainable tourism.

This research also has certain limitations. First, the research covered only Southern and Eastern Serbia, which is why the results cannot be fully generalized to other countries, and future research could apply the proposed model in other different cultural and geographical contexts. Second, the data were collected at one point in time, making it impossible to examine causal relationships, and future researchers could use a longitudinal design. Third, this research has shown that there are psychological mechanisms of transmission of effects, while future research could extend this model by adding new constructs, such as, for example, quality of life and trust in local institutions.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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