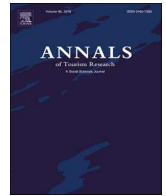


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# Impact of tourist-to-tourist interaction on tourism experience: The mediating role of cohesion and intimacy

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## ABSTRACT

Utilizing the Stimulus-Organism-Response paradigm, this study explores how self-disclosure, an important component of tourist-to-tourist interaction, influences tourist experience. Data were collected through a field experiment and analyzed via PLS analysis and PROCESS. Findings indicate that self-disclosure indirectly increases engagement by strengthening perceived cohesion and perceived intimacy. Perceived cohesion and perceived intimacy have indirect effects on satisfaction with experience, through engagement. Further, the initial tie strength moderates the effect of self-disclosure on perceived cohesion and perceived intimacy. These findings contribute to the development of tourism experience research from the perspective of tourist-to-tourist interaction and the social interaction literature by examining the unique interaction mechanism among tourists.

## Introduction

Human beings are intrinsically social (Aronson, 1972). Thus, social interactions play a vital role in everyday life by fulfilling individuals need for belonging and connecting with others (Bernstein, Zawadzki, Juth, Benfield, & Smyth, 2018). Previous research has shown that social interactions are related to positive physical and psychological health such as relieving stress (Cohen, Clark, & Sherrod, 1986) and enhancing positive emotions (Vittengl & Holt, 2000). Social interactions are also a critical component of tourist experience (White & White, 2008) since tourist experience is created through tourists' interactions with other people and places (Sharpley, 2014). Most previous studies that investigated the influence of interactions on tourist experiences have focused on interactions between tourists and tourist attractions (e.g. McGregor, 2000), tourists and local residents (e.g. Kastenholz, Carneiro, Eusébio, & Figueiredo, 2013), and tourists and service providers (e.g. Shonk & Chelladurai, 2008; Virabhakul & Huang, 2018). As to interactions among tourists, several researchers have accentuated its significance (Torres, 2016). For example, Bruner (1995) have suggested that the level of friendship within tour groups is one of the most significant determinants of tourism experience quality. Thus, examination of tourist-to-tourist interaction, its antecedents and its impacts on tourists' experiences, attitudes and behaviors are critical for both academics and practitioners (Huang & Hsu, 2010; Torres, 2016).

In most cases, tourism activities take place in unfamiliar or in somewhat familiar locations within a short period of time and are often linked with certain levels of hedonism. This makes tourist-to-tourist interaction to differ from interpersonal interactions in daily

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context in terms of mode, content, and depth. During travel, individuals' everyday roles and status play less important roles, and thus, they interact with each other with less inhibition (Wang, 2000). Understanding how tourist-to-tourist interaction influences tourists' experiences can help tourism operators develop and design tourism experiences that can improve the attractiveness of their offerings.

Self-disclosure is an important component of interpersonal interactions, playing a pivotal role in the process of establishing and maintaining relations (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Derlega, Metts, Petronio, and Margulis (1993) defined it as people's verbal revealing of personal details, opinions, or feelings about oneself. Previous studies have dominantly examined the role of self-disclosure in long-term relationships, specifically the effect of self-disclosure on liking and intimacy (closeness) (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998). Since individuals enjoy their travel experiences not only through seeking novelty, but also through meeting and communicating with other travelers who also seek similar experiences (Wang, 1999), interactions with other tourists play an important role in the travel experience formation process. Considering the critical role of self-disclosure in interpersonal interactions, this study argues that self-disclosure can also influence relationship development among tourists. However, examination of the role of level of self-disclosure in short-term interpersonal relationship development in specific contexts such as tourism has not attracted much attention from academics. Thus, the purpose of this study is to fill this gap by examining the impact of self-disclosure on tourists' evaluations of experiences.

Studies suggest that anonymity in communication can accelerate intimacy; thus, individuals who are strangers tend to be more engaged in deep self-disclosure compared to their interactions with their friends and colleagues (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Traveling provides people with opportunities to get away from their routine social networks, to some extent making anonymity the natural part of tourism. Furthermore, during their vacations, tourists may exhibit attitudes and behaviors that are significantly different than their everyday attitudes and behaviors (Torres, 2016). Therefore, it is critical to identify the mechanism of interpersonal interaction during travel through exploring level of self-disclosure among tourists and its subsequent impacts.

This study aims to explore the impact of interactions among tourists on tourist experience. More specifically, examines

- Whether and how self-disclosure impacts tourist engagement and satisfaction with tourism experience through enhancing their perception of relationships, based on theories in the field of social psychology.
- Whether and how the initial relationship between tourists exerts moderating effect on the relationship between self-disclosure and tourist perception of relationships.

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) logic (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) suggests that stimulus, organism and response are sequentially correlated. Stimuli, factors that can arouse individuals, are likely to evoke their inner emotional and cognitive reactions (Kim, Lee, & Jung, 2019), which results in corresponding behaviors. Drawing on this framework, this study proposes that tourist self-disclosure level (stimuli) influences their perceived cohesion and perceived intimacy (organism), which in turn affects their engagement and satisfaction with tourism experience (response). Also, the tie-strength is theorized as a moderator in the relationship between self-disclosure and perceived cohesion as well as perceived intimacy (Fig. 1). These proposed relations are tested utilizing data collected through a field experiment on 50 subjects who participated in a day trip to an ancient town in Southwest China. The field experiment data is analyzed a two-step approach utilizing a Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach.

Overall, findings of this research will make several contributions to the knowledge in the area. First, the focus on tourist self-disclosure, which has not investigated in detail in studies that have examined social interactions among tourists, represents an important contribution to the literature (Huang & Hsu, 2010; Torres, 2016). The conceptual model presented in this research enhances our understanding of how tourist-to-tourist interaction influences tourists' satisfaction with their experiences. Second, by examining the initial tie-strength as a moderator, this study aims to explore the impact of tie-strength on the relationship between self-disclosure and perceived cohesion as well as perceived intimacy. Therefore, this study contributes to self-disclosure literature that has given scant attention to short-term relationships (Andersson, Gustafsson, Kristensson, & Wästlund, 2016). Finally, this study extends our knowledge on tourist engagement by recognizing tourists' perceptions of social relationships as a potential direct

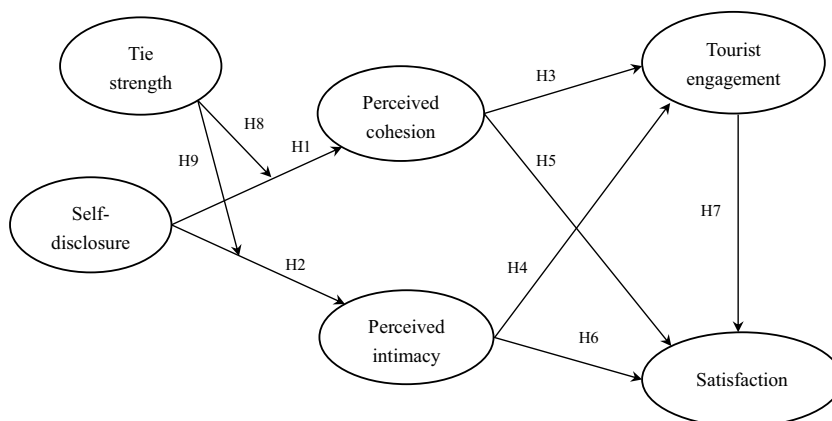


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

antecedent of tourist engagement. In addition, findings of this study is expected to provide further insight on how to enhance benefits for both tourists and tourism enterprises through managing tourist-to-tourist interactions.

## Conceptual background

### *Tourist-to-tourist interaction*

Customers' service experiences can be significantly influenced by fellow customers' actions and behaviors (Jung, Yoo, & Arnold, 2017). Studies argue that even the simple presence of fellow customers in the same servicescape can alter service experiences (Thakor, Suri, & Saleh, 2008). Thus, customer-to-customer interaction has become an emerging topic within the service marketing research in recent years (Nicholls, 2010). Most studies have focused on the face to face interactions among customers in service encounters (e.g. Zhang, Beatty, & Mothersbaugh, 2010) such as examining how to enhance customer satisfaction by managing the compatibility of customers (Martin & Pranter, 1989). As to whether the influence of customer-to-customer interaction is positive or negative, studies have reported contradictory findings. For instance, Gruen, Osmonbekov, and Czapski (2007) have argued that customer-to-customer interaction is likely to improve customers' perception of benefits gained from an enterprise's offerings. In contrast, customer misbehavior certainly disrupts other customers' service experience (Cai, Lu, & Gursoy, 2018). Du, Fan, and Feng's (2014) study shows that customers are likely to have more negative feelings and behavioral intentions in group service failure than in individual service failure, because they are easily influenced by other customers. Further, with the development of Internet technology, online communities not only directly foster customer-to-customer interaction (Tsiakali, 2018; Xu, Yap, & Hyde, 2016) but also facilitate off-line interaction among customers (Torres & Orłowski, 2017). While a number of studies have examined interactions and its consequences in the field of tourism, most of those studies have focused on the relationships between tourists and local residents (Kastenholz et al., 2013), and tourists and service providers (e.g. Shonk & Chelladurai, 2008; Sipe & Testa, 2018). Tourist-to-tourist interactions (TTI) have received little attention from tourism scholars (Torres, 2016).

Since consumption of travel experiences takes place in a longer period compared with other types of consumptions, it provides more opportunities for tourists to interact with fellow tourists. Crompton (1979) argues that TTI is easier and more likely to happen than interactions between tourists and local people due to cultural differences between tourists and locals (Cohen, 1972). Thus, TTI is likely to play a crucial part in shaping tourists experiences and their evaluations of experiences.

A small number of studies have examined the impact of tourist-to-tourist interactions on their experiences. For example, Holloway (1981) has reported that social interactions among tourists in a coach tour setting are a critical element of their overall experiences. Gorman (1979) have argued that the camaraderie developed between tourists during a trip has a significant influence on their experiences. Studies that examined the interactions among backpackers have reported that opportunities for social interactions during a backpacking trip are an important determinant for choosing backpacking as a means of travel (Murphy, 2001). For example, Sørensen (2003) has revealed how impromptu social interaction among backpackers can facilitate a backpacker travel culture. Loker-Murphy and Pearce (1995) have reported that interaction with fellow backpackers is essential in the formation of best backpacking experiences. In addition, as a "short-lived society", cruise ship is a liminal space which is different from everyday life (Yarnal, Kerstetter, & Yen, 2005). Thus, some researchers have focused on cruise tours to explore interactions among tourists, and illustrated that the development of relations with fellow passengers contribute to better cruise experiences (Huang & Hsu, 2010). Furthermore, Wei, Lu, Miao, Cai, and Wang (2017) have investigated the centrality of TTI in modern events, and confirmed that conference experiences is greatly driven by attendees' engagement in TTI. In addition, the advent of technology has enabled travelers to interact with other travelers even before they travel through social media and online travel communities (Roozen & Raedts, 2018). In most cases, these online interactions aim to gain knowledge about the destination, activities and experiences offered from individuals who share information about their recent experiences with the tourism offering (Bilgihan, Barreda, Okumus, & Nusair, 2016). Also, some online tourist-to-tourist interaction is aimed at finding like-minded people to engage in leisure experience together (Torres & Orłowski, 2017).

While a small number of studies have explored the impact of tourist-to-tourist interaction on tourism experience, the specific influencing mechanism has not received much attention. Utilizing the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) paradigm (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), this study proposes tourist self-disclosure level (stimuli) as a critical type of TTI, which is likely to directly influence tourists' perceived cohesion and perceived intimacy (organism). This study further proposes both perceived cohesion and perceived intimacy as critical determinants of tourists' engagement and satisfaction with their experiences (response).

### *Self-disclosure*

According to social penetration theory, self-disclosure is a critical constituent in the process of building and maintaining relations (Altman & Taylor, 1973) because it refers to individuals' voluntary revealing of their personal information verbally (Derlega et al., 1993). Personal information revealed through self-disclosure can include an individual's attitudes, interests, experiences, feelings, viewpoints, family information, job information, and so on. While early studies view self-disclosure as a stable relational trait (Jourard, 1971), recent studies argue that it is an interpersonal process, in which situational factors such as the relationship context play important roles in determining the type of personal information revealed (Kim & Song, 2016). Although examination of self-disclosure has a long history, exploring impacts of self-disclosure on interpersonal relationships in specific contexts such as tourism has not received much attention from scholars. Instead, most studies have paid attention to the universal linkage between self-disclosure and liking or closeness through laboratory-based experimental studies (e.g. Sprecher, Treger, & Wondra, 2013). Since some

inconsistent findings revealed by previous studies were attributed to effects of contextual factors (Collins & Miller, 1994), it is imperative to examine the role of self-disclosure in relationship development in specific contexts such as tourism.

Traveling provides people with opportunities to get rid of their identities in everyday life, entering the “non-place” proposed by Augé (1995), where all of them have similar temporary identities (i.e. tourists) and are anonymous to each other. To some extent, the anonymity per se is a significant attraction of travel. Thus, as an important component of TTI, self-disclosure should play a critical role in advancing relationships between tourists. However, how self-disclosure among tourists influences their attitudes and behaviors has not been investigated. Thus, the present study aims to fill this gap via investigating the influences of self-disclosure on tourists' experiences and evaluations of those experiences.

Self-disclosure has been researched as a multidimensional concept with five dimensions, namely intent, amount, valence, depth and honesty (Wheless & Grotz, 1976). Intent represents individuals' awareness and consciousness over their self-disclosure. Amount reflects the frequency and duration. Valence refers to the positive nature of the information being disclosed. Depth is the degree of intimacy, while honesty represents the authenticity. However, there is a broad consensus among scholars that depth is the most important dimension (Derlega et al., 1993). Specifically, intimate topics (such as one's opinions about romantic relationships) are regarded as a deeper level of disclosure than less personal topics (such as one's sports hobby) (Collins & Miller, 1994). Thus, this study is centered on the depth of tourist self-disclosure.

### *Tourist engagement*

Engagement has been defined differently in various contexts and disciplines (e.g. Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011). In marketing research, engagement is often viewed as customers' active participation in connecting with brands or service providers (Hollebeek, 2011). Customer engagement has become a core research topic deepening the knowledge of consumer behavior within the complicated environment of co-creation (Romero, 2017). Furthermore, recent studies have suggested positive effects of customer engagement on customer loyalty (Ong, Lee, & Ramayah, 2018), self-brand connection (Brodie et al., 2011), firm performance (Kumar & Pansari, 2016), etc.

Studies suggest that interaction between customers and service providers can have significant influences on customer experiences; higher the interaction level better the experience (Etgar, 2008). Tourism researchers have examined engagement from destination brand and tourist experience perspectives. Destination brand perspective refers to tourists' engagement with tourism brands (e.g. hotels and travel agencies), which is consistent with that in marketing research. For instance, So, King, and Sparks (2014) developed a five-factor scale to measure tourists' engagement with tourism brands, namely enthusiasm, attention, absorption, interaction, identification, which was later modified to a three-factor structure in tourism social media context (Harrigan, Evers, Miles, & Daly, 2017). Positive relationships between customer engagement and consumer loyalty to tourism brands have also been examined (So, King, Sparks, & Wang, 2016). Other scholars have examined tourist engagement while visiting destinations (Bryce, Curran, O'Gorman, & Taheri, 2015), which is defined as tourists' participation in on-site activities and experiences (Organ, Koenig-Lewis, Palmer, & Probert, 2015). Taheri, Jafari, and O'Gorman's (2014) developed a scale with eight indicators to measure tourist engagement, further suggesting three driving factors of it: cultural capital, multiple motivations and prior knowledge. Since TTI while traveling plays a critical part in tourists' satisfaction with overall experience, tourist engagement in this study is examined from the second perspective.

Hollebeek (2011) suggests that engagement is a multidimensional construct, including affective, cognitive, and behavioral elements. Based on Taheri et al.'s (2014) and So et al.'s (2014) works, tourist engagement in this study is conceptualized as tourists' affective and cognitive state towards their participation in specific activities offered by all relevant operators at tourism destinations since this study focuses on tourists' perception of their on-site experiences. According to So et al.'s (2014) study, absorption has both affective and cognitive elements, and refers to the level of tourists' concentration and engrossment while they are at the destination, which clearly captures the conceptualization of tourist engagement in this study. Therefore, we adopt absorption to represent tourist engagement.

### **Model development and hypotheses**

#### *Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework*

This study employs the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) paradigm (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) as the theoretical framework to develop an integrative model. According to the S-O-R framework, there are three correlated elements: stimulus, organism and response. Stimuli are “the influence that arouses the individual” (Eroglu, Machleit, & Davis, 2001). Stimuli can invoke individuals' internal affective and cognitive state (organism), which finally results in behavioral reactions (response). Previous studies have dominantly recognized certain features of an environment as stimuli, such as the characteristics of online brand communities (Islam & Rahman, 2016) and mobile travel app attributes (Fang, Zhao, Wen, & Wang, 2017). However, social scape is also a significant environmental stimulus (Slama & Tashchian, 1985), which can trigger a person's internal state. Therefore, this study considers interactions among tourists to be the stimuli. Tourist self-disclosure elicits their intrinsic state of perception of relationships (Organism), which then induces tourist engagement and satisfaction (Response).

*Stimulus: tourist self-disclosure*

Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1983) identified four types of sociality, one of which is privacy that determines how much personal information about oneself is revealed by an individual to others. Privacy is an important component of self-disclosure. People disclose certain level of personal information when communicating with others, especially if they have just met (Derlega et al., 1993). Thus, level of self-disclosure is likely to play a critical role in developing interpersonal relationships (Derlega et al., 1993). This is also true in tourism context. Social interaction is an important motivation for and component of traveling (Crompton, 1979). Even though tour groups can be viewed as temporary short-lived societies, group members are provided with a relaxed atmosphere and relatively intensive period of time to interact with each other (Wang, 1999). These social interactions sometimes can even result in formation of close friendships among some of the group members, which can last beyond the duration of the tour. The extant research related to self-disclosure has been focused on its influence on interpersonal long-term relationship development (Laurenceau et al., 1998). Influences of self-disclosure on tourist-to-tourist interactions in short term relationship development during tourism activities is still not known.

According to Goffman's (1971) social relationship theory, individuals are connected to a society through two kinds of relations: memberships oriented towards collectivities, and interpersonal relations pointing to other individuals. Similarly, Nadel's (1957) social role theory indicates that people play two types of roles in a society, namely member-oriented roles and relation-oriented roles. Therefore, while considering tour groups, we propose that members are engaged in building two types of ties: person-to-person ties and person-to-group ties. Communication cultivates ties within groups, thus groups are maintained via communication among members (Kavanaugh, Reese, Carroll, & Rosson, 2005). According to the social penetration theory, self-disclosure leads to intimacy, which indicates the strength of a relationship between individuals. Therefore, this study utilizes perceived intimacy to represent the strength of ties between group members, indicating interpersonal relationship. On the other hand, according to the social integration theory, perceived cohesion refers to individuals' subjective evaluation of their relationship with certain groups (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990), which is employed in this research to represent ties between members and the group as a whole. Since perceived intimacy and cohesion involve tourists' perception and judgement, which are closely related to both affective and cognitive aspects, these two concepts match the definition of organism.

Self-disclosure is a process of social exchange (Altman & Taylor, 1973), which facilitates the development of relationships or formation of groups (Lawler, Thye, & Yoon, 2000). Self-disclosure is a decisive factor of uncertainty reduction (Kollock, 1994) and positive emotion generation (Lawler & Yoon, 1993) in relationship development. When group members exchange their personal information during their interactions, they have a better understanding of each other and find each other to be more predictable, resulting in higher perceived cohesion. Thus, successful exchange makes individuals feel good, which further improves the ties between them and their groups.

**Hypothesis 1.** (H1). Self-disclosure has a positive effect on perceived cohesion.

Reis and Shaver's (1988) interpersonal model of intimacy suggests that self-disclosure contributes to the experience of intimacy in interactions. Similarly, many other studies have proposed that intimacy increases mainly through self-disclosure (e.g. Derlega et al., 1993; Jourard, 1971) because disclosers could establish interpersonal relatedness with others. Further, studies argue that revealing of the discloser's core self is more salient in leading to intimate experiences (Laurenceau et al., 1998) due to possible affirmation of the discloser's opinion of the self by the listener (Reis & Shaver, 1988).

Scholars have examined the promoting effect of self-disclosure on interpersonal relationships from various perspectives. Firstly, the process of self-disclosing is intrinsically pleasant and cathartic. People associate these feelings with the target of disclosure, leading to their affection for the target (Jourard, 1971). Secondly, Bem's (1972) self-perception theory indicates that people always infer their thoughts and feelings from their behaviors. Hence, people deduce their liking for and trust in the other once they disclose personal information to another (Chaikin & Derlega, 1974). On the other hand, disclosure reciprocity effect suggests that one's self-disclosure triggers the other's disclosure (Reis & Shaver, 1988). As suggested by Berger and Calabrese (1974) uncertainty reduction theory, people's liking for another one can be promoted if the other makes self-disclosure, and the promoting degree is determined by the degree of uncertainty reduction, which can result in higher level of intimacy.

**Hypothesis 2.** (H2). Self-disclosure has a positive effect on perceived intimacy.

*Organisms: perceived cohesion and perceived intimacy*

The concept of perceived cohesion is consistent with the conceptualization of social identity, which assumes that membership of a certain social group is a significant predictor of future behavior (Hogg & Reid, 2006), and the extent of individuals' behaviors depend on how strong their identities are with their group (Terry & Hogg, 1996). Research has suggested that group cohesion can significantly affect members' participative behavior (Yoo & Alavi, 2001). In a group tour setting, Yarnal (2004) argues that perception of cohesion enables group members to be more adventurous and more willing to engage in various tour group activities. Bollen and Hoyle (1990) also claim that if tour group members develop belonging sense to the group, they will be willing to connect with their groups and be motivated to take part in group activities. Therefore, this study proposes that higher perceived cohesion results in higher tourist engagement with on-site activities at destinations.

**Hypothesis 3.** (H3). Perceived cohesion has a positive effect on tourist engagement.



Intimate relationship obscures the boundary between self and the intimate companion (Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007). In other words, intimacy is generally accompanied with a psychological connection, which makes individuals hold common emotional and physiological bond with intimate others (Cwir, Carr, Walton, & Spencer, 2011). This bonding process results in higher cooperation (Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002) and favoring of each other among intimate individuals (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). Islam and Rahman (2017) report that interactions among customers can encourage them to remain in and actively engage in communities. Participation in tour groups provides opportunities to develop intimate relationships with other group members since co-creation process of shared experiences requires tour group members' participation in various activities (Yarnal & Kerstetter, 2005). Therefore, when tour group members feel close to each other, they are more likely to immerse themselves in the experiential context of tourism and take part in on-site tourism activities.

Interactions between tourists can influence their affective state (manifested by tourist engagement in this study) during the experience process (Wirtz & Bateson, 1999). However, it is tourists' perception that leads to their follow-up evaluation or behavioral intention (Cohen, Prayag, & Moital, 2014). Therefore, as an objective interaction behavior, self-disclosure may affect their engagement through perception of their relationship with other tourists and the group as a whole.

**Hypothesis 4.** (H4). Perceived intimacy has a positive effect on tourist engagement.

**Hypothesis 4a.** (H4a). Perceived cohesion mediates the relationship between self-disclosure and tourist engagement.

**Hypothesis 4b.** (H4b). Perceived intimacy mediates the relationship between self-disclosure and tourist engagement.

Perceived cohesion is conceptualized as tour group members' feelings of being part of a group, creating greater affective identification (Andrews, Kacmar, Blakely, & Bucklew, 2008), collaboration (Beal, Cohen, Burke, & McLendon, 2003), and satisfaction with the group (Tekleab, Quigley, & Tesluk, 2009). Higher perceived cohesion indicates that members perceive themselves to be in a supportive, warm and unified tour atmosphere psychologically. This can result in positive perceptions and attitudes (Grissemann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012). As suggested by Bohlmann, Rosa, Bolton, and Qualls (2006), customers' evaluation on and satisfaction with products or services will be enhanced if their social identity is generated through belongingness to a certain consumer group (Rather, 2018). Thus, satisfaction with tourism experience in this study refers to tourists' evaluation of their overall experience, and we propose that higher perceived cohesion also leads to higher level of satisfaction with tourism experiences.

**Hypothesis 5.** (H5). Perceived cohesion has a positive effect on satisfaction with tourism experiences.

Tour group members participate in group activities and become part of the group to achieve their traveling goals in an unfamiliar destination where they may feel uncertain about whether they will have a satisfactory experience. One way for them to alleviate such uncertainties is to relate to other people who are also in a similar situation (Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007). In fact, this is one of the main reasons why individuals take part in tour groups. During the tour, they can establish intimate relationship with other members, which can result in receiving social support for their experiences from other members of the tour. Thus, the intimacy and resulting social support can facilitate their goal pursuit (Uchino, 2006) and is positively related to group satisfaction (Maton, 1988).

**Hypothesis 6.** (H6). Perceived intimacy has a positive effect on satisfaction with tourism experience.

#### *Response: tourist engagement and satisfaction with tourism experience*

The focus of tourism experience research has shifted from examination of displayed objects to tourists' subjective understanding and feelings (Uriely, 2005). Also, the discussion about authenticity of tourism experience has moved from objective authenticity and constructive authenticity to existential authenticity (Wang, 1999). These changes illustrate the importance of subjective evaluations and perceptions of tourists and their key role in the formation of tourism experience. Tourism experience is an aesthetic process, resulting from the interaction between tourists and the environment they are engaged in. Tourist experience cannot be perceived or recognized passively. It is tourists' active participation that creates their unique experiences. In other words, tourism experience is formed through tourists' engagement in tourism activities, and better engagement leads to higher evaluation of the experience (Taheri et al., 2014).

Several studies have suggested that the relationship between tourists can have significant influence on their satisfaction (e.g. Huang & Hsu, 2010; Martin & Pranter, 1989). In particular, Huang and Hsu (2010) argue that the quality of the relationship between tourists indirectly affects their satisfaction through their perception of psychological benefits. According to this logic, tourists' perception of their relationship with other tourists and the whole group may indirectly influence their satisfaction with experience through engagement, which in this study refers to a pleasant affective and cognitive state.

**Hypothesis 7.** (H7). Tourist engagement has a positive effect on satisfaction with tourism experience.

**Hypothesis 7a.** (H7a). Tourist engagement mediates the relationship between perceived cohesion and satisfaction with tourism experience.

**Hypothesis 7b.** (H7b). Tourist engagement mediates the relationship between perceived intimacy and satisfaction with tourism experience.

### *The moderating effect of the initial tie strength*

Previous studies that examined communications among customers have distinguished communications among strangers from communications among acquaintances in terms of the tie strength between communicators. For instance, [Baron, Harris, and Davies \(1996\)](#) have compared communications between customers who do not know each other and between purchase pals, and found that conversations between friends are more likely to involve private information. This indicates that tie strength between communicators does affect the interaction mechanism. In fact, [Hwang \(1999\)](#) argues that individuals first assess the closeness of their relationship with others in social interaction situations, and then choose appropriate behavior based on their assessment of relationship closeness. Thus, the level of self-disclosure and its effects are not the same when subjects are strangers compared with acquaintances. [Ruppel et al. \(2016\)](#) argue that the level of self-disclosure is dependent on the tie strength between the discloser and the listener. Since strangeness and novelty are key elements tourists seek during their travel ([Cohen, 1972](#)), they may think and behave differently when interacting with other tourists who are strangers to them ([Uriely, 2005](#)). For example, tourists express themselves more freely than in everyday life ([Uriely, 2005](#)). This is possibly because they are less restricted by social norms and there are fewer relationships of interest. The development of relationships is likely to be more salient between tourists who are strangers than between acquaintances. Therefore, this study proposes that both the relationships between self-disclosure and perceived cohesion and between self-disclosure and perceived intimacy are negatively moderated by the initial tie strength among group members.

**Hypothesis 8.** (H8). The initial tie strength among group members negatively moderates the relationship between self-disclosure and perceived cohesion.

**Hypothesis 9.** (H9). The initial tie strength among group members negatively moderates the relationship between self-disclosure and perceived intimacy.

## **Methods**

### *Research design*

Data for the current research were gathered by a field experiment. A total of 50 individuals were recruited to take a day trip to an ancient town in Southwest China. Not only undergraduate and post graduate students, but also working individuals were recruited for the study. They were randomly assigned to 10 groups, each group having five members, to make sure that each group included both acquaintances and strangers. Groups were told that they were free to visit and take part in activities at the ancient town. However, members of each group were not allowed to have contact with members of other groups. Any interactions observed between groups were immediately stopped by the researchers.

Data were collected in two steps. Every participant was asked to complete five questionnaires; one before the trip and four after the trip. Before the trip, demographic information and the initial tie strength between group members were measured. Each of the four questionnaires completed after the trip aimed at one of his or her group companions. Each participant was required to fill out a structured questionnaire for each group member, which included items to measure self-disclosure, perceived cohesion, perceived intimacy, engagement, satisfaction with tourism experience.

### *Measurement*

All constructs were measured using scales adapted from previous studies. Tie strength was measured with three items derived from [Mittal, Huppertz, and Khare \(2008\)](#). Items for measuring the depth of self-disclosure were adopted from [Wheeless \(1978\)](#) scale. Perceived cohesion was operationalized as consisting of sense of belonging and feeling of morale, which was measured by six items ([Bollen & Hoyle, 1990](#)). The OIS scale developed by [Aron et al. \(1991\)](#) was adopted to measure perceived intimacy. As suggested by [Aron et al. \(1991\)](#), respondents were asked to select, from a list of seven possibilities represented by pair of circles, the one that best describes their relationships with the others. Tourist engagement was measured with 6 items borrowed from [So et al.'s \(2014\)](#) instrument. Satisfaction with tourism experience was measured using [Jensen, Li, and Uysal's \(2017\)](#) single item. A 7-point Likert scale was adopted in the questionnaire. It is worth mentioning that slight modifications were made on the items to fit in the current research context. For example, one item measuring tie strength which was originally worded as “How close do you feel to the doctor?” was modified to “I fell close to my teammate”.

Since the present study was carried out in China, all items were translated from English to Chinese using a back translation approach. Afterwards, the translated questionnaire was distributed to several researchers and doctoral students to confirm its validity. Based on their responses, the questionnaire was revised. Next, the questionnaire was pilot tested on 50 respondents to ensure measurement clarity and to check whether the items represent the constructs. Results of factor analysis showed that the Cronbach's alphas were all above 0.70, which indicated internal consistency of the constructs. Therefore, no items were eliminated from the survey. Afterwards, the field experiment was carried out.

### *Common method variance (CMV)*

Common method variance is a potential problem with self-reported data ([Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003](#)). This

study adopted several techniques to avoid this. First, participants were asked to fill in questionnaires before and after the day trip, measuring different variables. Second, they were told that their answers were anonymous, and they did not know the exact purpose of the survey. Third, they were told that there were no right or wrong answers and they could answer questions honestly. Fourth, the questions on the questionnaire were randomized. Finally, Harman's single-factor test was utilized to assess whether there was CMV (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The results of factor analysis indicated that one-factor model explained 32% of the variance. The results of the six-factor model indicated that 83% of the variance was explained by the underlying six factors. Thus, CMV was not a concern in this study.

### Data analysis

The proposed model was tested utilizing a Partial Least Squares (PLS) analysis using SmartPLS v. 3.2.8 software since the emphasis of the analysis was to identify the relationships between the constructs included in the model. Compared with co-variance based structural equation modeling, like LISREL and AMOS, PLS is a variance based equation modeling approach for predictive analysis (Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009). An increasing number of tourism researchers have adopted PLS analysis in recent years due to its advantages over co-variance based methods (e.g. Amaro & Duarte, 2015; Chen & Li, 2018) such that PLS neither requires large samples nor assumes that the data is normally distributed (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2016). Since PLS is better at handling small sample sizes, and the higher statistical power of PLS enables it to examine less developed or developing theory for exploratory research (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2018), which are the cases of the present study, PLS was utilized in this study. The proposed model was tested through a two-step process. First, the measurement model was estimated to determine the reliability and validity of the measurement constructs. Afterwards, the path model was estimated to determine the significance and the strength of the relationships between the variables included in the model. The non-parametric bootstrapping method was utilized with 5000 resamples (Amaro & Duarte, 2015).

PROCESS was adopted to test the mediation effects, using bootstrapping approach. This approach provides more accurate tests of indirect effects that are examined using small samples (Hayes, 2009). Additionally, PROCESS is able to probe the nature of mediation models with multiple mediators (e.g. perceived cohesion and perceived intimacy) in parallel (Hayes, 2012). This study utilized 5000 resampling processes.

## Results

### Descriptive analysis

Table 1 presents the demographic profiles of participants. Of the 50 participants, 41 were female (82%) and 9 were male (18%); 22% of them were younger than 20 years old, while 78% were between the ages 20–29. Most of them (76%) had no more than 1500 RMB disposable income. The initial tie strength between group members were measured before the trip.

### Assessment of the measurement model

Table 2 presents the reliability and validity of all constructs utilized in the conceptual model. Factor loadings of these constructs were statistically significant and > 0.70 threshold level (Barclay, Higgins, & Thompson, 1995). All constructs' average variance extracted (AVEs) values were higher than the threshold of 0.50, suggesting that constructs had adequate and satisfactory convergent validity (Hair, Sarstedt, Hopkins, & Kuppelwieser, 2014). Composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha values of these constructs were higher than 0.70 (Table 2), establishing internal consistency. Discriminant validity of the constructs was assessed utilizing three approaches. First, cross-loadings of the indicators were examined. Results showed that all loadings of each indicator on its construct were higher than the cross-loadings on other constructs. Due to space limitations, the results are not presented in the paper. Second, Fornell–Larcker criterion analysis was employed. As presented in Table 3, square roots of all constructs' AVEs were greater than the correlation between the constructs, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Third, Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt's (2015) heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) approach was adopted. The HTMT ratios (Table 3) were all lower than 0.90 threshold (Henseler et al., 2015) and the HTMT<sub>inference</sub> criterion tested by complete bootstrapping showed that the

**Table 1**  
Participants' profiles.

Variable	Categories	Number	Percentage
Gender	Men	9	18
	Women	41	82
Age	Under 20	11	22
	20–29	39	78
Education level	Undergraduate	29	58
	Graduate	21	42
Income per month	Under 1500 RMB	38	76
	Over 1500	12	24



**Table 2**  
Reliability and validity of the constructs.

	Factor loading	AVE	Composite reliability	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Self-disclosure		0.700	0.903	0.857
I intimately disclose who I really am, openly and fully in my conversation.	0.856***			
I often disclose intimate, personal things about myself without hesitation.	0.855***			
I feel that I sometimes do not control my self-disclosure of personal or intimate things I tell about myself.	0.817***			
Once I get started, I intimately and fully reveal myself in my self-disclosures.	0.819***			
Perceived cohesion		0.664	0.922	0.901
I feel a sense of belonging to this group.	0.828***			
I feel that I am a member of this group.	0.896***			
I see myself as a part of this group.	0.743***			
I am enthusiastic about this group.	0.733***			
I am happy to be at this group.	0.861***			
This group is one of the best groups in this.	0.818***			
Perceived intimacy		1.000	1.000	1.000
Please select one pair of circles presented below that best describes your relationship with the others.	1.000***			
Engagement		0.714	0.937	0.918
When I am interacting with the tourism site, I forget everything else around me.	0.726***			
Time flies when I am interacting with the tourism site.	0.735***			
When I am interacting with the tourism site, I get carried away.	0.914***			
When interacting with the tourism site, it is difficult to detach myself.	0.939***			
In my interaction with the tourism site, I am immersed.	0.895***			
When interacting with the tourism site intensely, I feel happy.	0.836***			
Satisfaction		1.000	1.000	1.000
As a visitor, I am satisfied with my overall experience at this site.	1.000***			
Tie strength		0.968	0.989	0.983
I feel close to my teammate.	0.979***			
My tie to my teammate is strong.	0.995***			
I am familiar with my teammate.	0.977***			

Note: \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 3**  
Fornell–Larcker criterion analysis and HTMT ratios.

	Eng	PC	PI	Sat	SD	TS
Engagement (Eng)	<b>0.845</b>					
Perceived cohesion (PC)	0.275(0.276)	<b>0.815</b>				
Perceived intimacy (PI)	0.327(0.330)	0.348(0.338)	<b>1.000</b>			
Satisfaction (Sat)	0.558(0.577)	0.236(0.231)	0.185(0.185)	<b>1.000</b>		
Self-disclosure (SD)	0.247(0.273)	0.312(0.331)	0.825(0.889)	0.125(0.137)	<b>0.837</b>	
Tie strength (TS)	0.066(0.068)	-0.000(0.049)	0.443(0.446)	-0.006(0.008)	0.481(0.520)	<b>0.984</b>

Note: HTMT ratios are in the parentheses. The diagonal elements (in bold) are the square roots of all constructs' AVEs.

upper confidence bounds (97.5%) were all lower than 1 (ranged from 0.159 to 0.931), suggesting there is no discriminant validity problems in this study.

*Assessment of the path model*

The path model was evaluated utilizing several criteria. As suggested by Henseler, Hubona & Ray (2016), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) was examined as the approximate model fit criterion. According to the instruction of SmartPLS (<https://www.smartpls.com/>), a SRMR value  $< 0.10$  is considered a good fit. The result of present study (SRMR = 0.087) thereby confirms an adequate model fit. Besides, the Chi-Square of the model was 1032.537. Furthermore, all  $R^2$  values were above the 0.10 level recommended by Falk and Miller (1992) (Perceived cohesion: 0.168; Perceived intimacy: 0.690; Engagement: 0.136; Satisfaction: 0.319). Also, the Stone–Geisser's  $Q^2$  values for endogenous constructs (Perceived cohesion: 0.084; Perceived intimacy: 0.665; Engagement: 0.087; Satisfaction: 0.302) were all positive, which provided validation of the predictive relevance of the model

**Table 4**  
Path estimates for the conceptual model.

Hypothesis	Path	Path coefficients	t-Value	Support
H1	SD → PC	0.410	4.991***	Yes
H2	SD → PI	0.806	23.258***	Yes
H3	PC → Eng	0.184	2.148†	Yes
H4	PI → Eng	0.263	3.558***	Yes
H5	PC → Sat	0.097	1.118	No
H6	PI → Sat	−0.025	0.371	No
H7	Eng → Sat	0.540	8.073***	Yes
H8	SD × TS → PC	−0.221	2.449†	Yes
H9	SD × TS → PI	−0.097	1.952†	Yes

Note: SD = Self-disclosure, PC = Perceived cohesion, PI = Perceived intimacy, Eng = Engagement, Sat = Satisfaction, TS = Tie strength.

†  $p < 0.1$ .

\*  $p < 0.05$ .

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

(Hair et al., 2016).

Table 4 shows the estimated path coefficients for the relationships proposed in the model. As proposed in H1 and H2, self-disclosure was found to positively and significantly affect perceived cohesion ( $\beta = 0.410, p < 0.001$ ) and perceived intimacy ( $\beta = 0.806, p < 0.001$ ). As hypothesized in H3 and H4, perceived cohesion and perceived intimacy were positively related to tourist engagement, which provided support for H3 and H4 ( $\beta = 0.184, p < 0.05; \beta = 0.263, p < 0.001$ ). Also, as proposed in H7, tourist engagement had significant positive effect on satisfaction with the experience ( $\beta = 0.540, p < 0.001$ ). However, perceived cohesion and perceived intimacy were found to have no significant impact on satisfaction with the experience, indicating that H5 and H6 were not supported.

As to the proposed moderation effect of the initial tie strength, this study utilized PLS to assess the moderation effects. Chin, Marcolin, and Newsted (2003) argued that PLS can estimate moderation effects more accurately than regression or ANOVA-based techniques. In order to test the moderation effect, this study multiplied self-disclosure (predictor) and tie strength (moderator) to generate an interaction construct (self-disclosure x tie strength) to predict perceived cohesion and perceived intimacy. In this way, new indicators originated from the two sets of indicators measuring the predictor and the moderator were used to reflect the interaction construct (Chin et al., 2003). As presented in Table 4, the estimated path coefficients for the moderation effect of tie strength on the relationship between self-disclosure and perceived cohesion ( $\beta = -0.221, p < 0.05$ ) as well as perceived intimacy ( $\beta = -0.097, p < 0.1$ ) were significant, which provided support for H8 and H9. This indicated that the relationships between self-disclosure and perceived cohesion as well as perceived intimacy were stronger when tourists in a group are strangers to each other.

*Assessment of the mediation effects*

Table 5 shows the results of all mediation effects. Self-disclosure had an indirect effect on engagement through perceived cohesion (coefficient = 0.0378, 95% CI [0.0023, 0.1003]) and perceived intimacy (coefficient = 0.2392, 95% CI [0.0826, 0.4141]). The total indirect effect of self-disclosure on engagement through both mediators taken together was 0.277 with a bootstrap 95% confidence interval [0.1136, 0.4571]. Since no zero values were included in any of the CIs, the indirect effect was statistically significant. This indicated that self-disclosure indirectly increased engagement by strengthening perceived cohesion and perceived intimacy, which was consistent with H4a and H4b.

In subsequent steps, mediating effects of engagement on the relationships between perceived cohesion and satisfaction, and between perceived intimacy and satisfaction were tested separately. The indirect effect between perceived cohesion and satisfaction was significant (coefficient = 0.1268, 95% CI [0.0390, 0.2355]). Besides, the direct effect of perceived cohesion and satisfaction was not statistically significant (coefficient = 0.0948, 95% CI [−0.0284, 0.2180]), suggesting complete mediation and supporting H7a. Similarly, the indirect effect between perceived intimacy and satisfaction was significant (coefficient = 0.1703, 95% CI [0.0788,

**Table 5**  
Regression coefficients of mediation models estimated using PROCESS.

Model	Indirect Effect	S.E.	95% Confidence interval		Direct Effect	S.E.	95% Confidence interval		
			Boot Lower	Boot Upper			Boot Lower	Boot Upper	
SD- PC&PI →Eng	PC	0.0378	0.0242	0.0023	0.1003	−0.0734	0.1038	−0.2781	0.1313
	PI	0.2392	0.0852	0.0826	0.4141				
	Total	0.2770	0.0871	0.1136	0.4571				
PC-Eng-Sat	0.1268	0.0493	0.0390	0.2355	0.0948	0.0625	−0.0284	0.2180	
PI-Eng-Sat	0.1703	0.0495	0.0788	0.2767	0.0126	0.0626	−0.1109	0.1360	

Note: SD = Self-disclosure, PC = Perceived cohesion, PI = Perceived intimacy, Eng = Engagement, Sat = Satisfaction.

0.2767]). The direct effect of perceived intimacy and satisfaction was not significant either (coefficient = 0.0126, 95% CI [−0.1109, 0.1360]), also indicating complete mediation and supporting H7b.

## Discussions and implications

The present research makes contributions to the development of tourism experience research from the perspective of tourist-to-tourist interaction. First, this study sheds light on the impacts of self-disclosure among tourists on their experiences. While a small number of studies have investigated TTI in tourism setting (Huang & Hsu, 2010), the content of TTI has not received much attention. This study identified self-disclosure as a significant constituent of interpersonal interactions among tourists and examined effects of self-disclosure on tourist experience in short-term and temporary interaction settings, broadening the extant literature, which has mainly explored how self-disclosure functions in long term relations (Jacobs, Evans, Kleine III, & Landry, 2001).

Second, this study presented and empirically tested a theoretical model, which integrates self-disclosure, perceived cohesion, perceived intimacy, tourist engagement and tourist satisfaction, responding to the calls for studies that aim to enhance our understanding of how TTI can influence satisfaction (Cohen et al., 2014). Examination of tourists as social beings rather than business units also echoes Larsen's (2007) appeal that tourist experiences should be studied as psychological phenomena utilizing conceptual frameworks for analyzing general psychological process. Moreover, most prior research on TTI has directly paid attention to its outcomes such as satisfaction and loyalty (e.g. Huang & Hsu, 2010), lacking a thorough exploration of the complex nature of the TTI. Results of this study indicate that perceived cohesion and perceived intimacy simultaneously mediate the relationship between self-disclosure and tourist engagement. Furthermore, this study utilized a number of theories, such as social penetration theory and social cohesion theory, in examining the mechanism of how TTI affects tourist experience through establishing social relation perceptions.

Third, the present study advances the social interaction literature by investigating the unique interaction mechanism among tourists in tourism context where tourists are anonymous and in quest for pleasure. This study empirically tested the predictive influence of self-disclosure among tourists on perceived cohesion and perceived intimacy. This aligns with previous studies showing that self-disclosure positively impacts intimacy in long-term relationship development (e.g. Laurenceau et al., 1998). All of the participants of this study were young people who were either college students or recent graduates, which resulted in a very homogeneous sample. As suggested by the similarity-attraction hypothesis, homogeneity of the sample may have contributed to the formation of perception of similarity, which may have brought about attraction and then cohesion among group members (Webber & Donahue, 2001). This argument is consistent with customer compatibility management literature suggestion that perception of customers' homogeneity promotes the development of customer-to-customer relations (Wu, 2007). Therefore, the homogeneity of the sample may be a potential factor influencing the self-disclosure and subsequent perception of intimacy and cohesion. The moderating effect of tie strength on that relationship was also examined. Findings suggest that the more familiar the group members with each other, the weaker the impact of self-disclosure during the trip on perceived cohesion and perceived intimacy. This finding contradicts with Collins and Miller' (1994) assertion that disclosure-liking effect is strongest in established relationships. However, it echoes Sandstrom and Dunn's (2014) finding that people can improve their subjective positive feelings more significantly during communications with weakly connected members of their outer social circle.

As aforementioned, individuals participate in tourism activities in order to escape from stressful daily life, which can lead to unusual behaviors during the traveling process. It is important to note that data for this study were collected from young people (all < 30 years old as presented in Table 1), with distinct motivations and personalities such as sensation-seeking (Pizam et al., 2004), novelty and excitement seeking (Lepp & Gibson, 2003). Young tourists may place more trust on strangers encountered during a trip and communicate with them more freely. To some extent, meeting like-minded strangers can be viewed as an attraction in itself for young tourists. On the other hand, tourists who are strangers to each other may be more prone to initiate anonymous communication since participation in tourism activities can be viewed as a non-place activities mentioned by Augé (1995), which provides a sense of liberation and freedom from conflict of interest. In this case, interactions among tourists are more likely to be simple and authentic. This is a possible reason why the effect of self-disclosure on perceived cohesion and perceived intimacy between strangers in tourism context is more salient than that between friends. Also, the distinct influencing mechanism of self-disclosure among tourists is possibly due to the fact that the anonymity in tourism world is somewhat different from that of online or face-to-face context in everyday life. In addition, as a third place, tourism space offers opportunities for escape and interaction; thus, participating in a group tour can give members not only a sense of relaxation, security, control, but also the opportunity to express themselves and share their intimate feelings (Yarnal & Kerstetter, 2005). In this kind of situation, self-disclosure and intimacy are more likely to emerge between members of a group tour who are strangers.

The concept of cohesion has been mostly researched on work teams (e.g. Carron & Brawley, 2012). The present study introduces it to interactions among tourists, and empirically tests its significance in the formation of tourist experience. Therefore, the current study also expands the knowledge on group dynamics by indicating that group cohesion not only functions in long-term interactions but also exerts a crucial influence on short-term group interactions, conforming the conclusion of Torres' (2016) ethnographic research.

Findings also suggest that tourist engagement completely mediates the relationships between perceived cohesion as well as perceived intimacy and tourists' satisfaction with tourism experience respectively. This reflects the notion that people has the need for social interaction and belonging in unfamiliar tourism environment (Crompton, 1979). As suggested by the social support theory, family members, friends and workmates provide social support to individuals in their everyday life (Thoits, 1995). Tourists need support even more when they travel because tourism activities usually take place in a completely strange and unfamiliar environment, which makes other tourists as pivotal source of social support. However, tourist experience is not an objective existence that

can be directly obtained. Instead, it is tourists' subjective feelings and evaluations formed through their participation and interaction in tourism activities. Therefore, tourists' perceptions of cohesion with the group and intimacy with other tourists do indirectly enhance tourists' satisfaction with tourism experience through increasing their engagement.

This study also broadens the research on tourist engagement, which is an emerging topic in tourism literature. This study specifically responds to Taheri et al.'s (2014) call that more studies are needed to enhance the theoretical understanding of tourist engagement. Findings suggest that self-disclosure enhances tourist engagement through perceived cohesion and perceived intimacy. Previous research has suggested that positive interactions with others positively affect the level of tourist engagement (Taheri et al., 2014), which is consistent with our finding. A very small number studies that examined tourist engagement has mainly explored the antecedents from destination perspectives such as authenticity (Bryce et al., 2015), and tourist perspectives such as previous experience, motivations and cultural capital (Taheri et al., 2014). The present study provides another perspective by focusing on the interpersonal relationship of TTI in order to extend the literature on driving factors of tourist engagement.

Several practical implications arise from the present study. Since interpersonal trust and trust in tourism institutions are positively linked (Nunkoo, Ramkissoon, & Gursoy, 2012), and self-disclosure among tourists is positively related to their satisfaction with tourism experience, it may be critical for tourism operators to create opportunities such as game loop or self-introduction for tourists to initiate communication with other group members. These opportunities are likely to enhance interactions among tourists. Considering the fact that human beings are social in nature (Aronson, 1972), these interactions may result in more self-disclosure since individuals regard self-disclosure as a crucial constituent of interpersonal interactions. As highlighted in this study and other studies, self-disclosure is an indispensable component of building and maintaining relationships (Altman & Taylor, 1973) through influencing level of liking and intimacy (closeness) (Laurenceau et al., 1998). Thus, interaction opportunities provided by tourism operators are likely to exert significant positive impact on tourists' satisfaction with tourism experience.

This study finds that higher the perceived cohesion and perceived intimacy, higher the engagement of tourists. Thus, it is important for tourism providers to pay close attention to fulfilling tourists' individual needs as social beings rather than just viewing them as customers. Specifically, operators should provide opportunities to foster the relationship between tourists to enhance the engagement of the group by providing various interactive activities for tourists to take part in, to facilitate the development of their feelings of closeness and improve attachment to the group. Considering the fact that tourist engagement completely mediates the relationship between perceived cohesion as well as perceived intimacy and tourist satisfaction, it is critical for tourism operators to improve tourist engagement with the tourism experience. Operators may conduct formal and informal surveys among tourist to identify tourism experience features and attributes that can improve the interestingness, attractiveness and interactivity of those tourism experience offerings. Those efforts may result in higher engagement during travel and eventually enhance tourist satisfaction with their tourism experiences.

Finally, results show that the initial tie strength between tourists is a critical moderator. The effect of self-disclosure on perceived cohesion and perceived intimacy is stronger among tourists who are strangers compared with acquaintances. Findings imply that operators should pay special attention to the formation of groups and strengthening the relationship among group members. In particular, they should develop procedures to identify "like-minded strangers" before forming groups. Since developing relationships with other members even with the whole group is easier for tour groups made up of strangers who are similar in some aspects compared to groups of acquaintances, operators are strongly urged to include mostly strangers in the same group, if possible, to improve the interaction quality and the level of self-disclosure among the group members.

#### *Limitations and future research*

This study has several limitations. First, although a field experiment was conducted to gather the data, which is unique in studying tourist experience, all participants were from China and < 30 years old. In addition, the sample size of this study was rather small due to the control, cost and time issues. Thus the representativeness and generalizability of the results are limited. Since cultural differences can limit the applicability of empirical findings in cross-cultural tourism research, especially for social issues (Levy, 2010), it is necessary to validate the model in other cultural contexts.

Second, the present research focused on a single type of tourist-to-tourist interaction, namely self-disclosure, because social psychology research has identified it as the core driving factor of relationship development. However, TTI has a rich connotation, with different patterns of manifestation. Therefore, the influencing mechanism of TTI on tourist experience is somewhat complex. Future studies might wish to develop a classification form that observes how tourists interact with each other. Then study the effects of different types of TTI on tourist experience.

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