



From Place Distinctiveness to Tourism Support: The Role of Protecting and Supporting Behaviours of Meghalaya's Living Root Bridges Communities

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Abstract

One of the core factors that drives tourism is the uniqueness of the destination's attractions. Residents' supporting behaviour plays a critical role in sustaining tourism development, as it is heavily influenced by the distinct characteristics of their environment. Consequently, the Community's Behaviour influences their support for tourism developments, and this behaviour is shaped by how distinct the attraction is. The Living Root Bridges (LRBs) communities of Meghalaya provide an ideal context to explore these relationships. 152 samples were collected from Nongriat and Tyra village using a structured questionnaire, and the data were analysed through correlation and multiple regression analyses. The findings indicate that place distinctiveness significantly and positively influences both protecting and supporting behaviors, which subsequently enhance overall tourism support. This implies that when residents perceive their community as unique, they exhibit voluntary behaviours that foster tourism activities, thereby enhancing their economic and social wellbeing, while preserving their natural and cultural heritage. Therefore, this study contributes to the tourism literature by positioning Place Distinctiveness as a primary driver of Community Citizenship Behaviour toward support for tourism in an indigenous and rural destination.

Keywords: Place Distinctiveness; Community Citizenship Behaviour; Protecting Behaviour; Supporting Behaviour; Support for Tourism; Rural Tourism; Indigenous Tourism; Sustainable Tourism.

1. Introduction

Tourism in rural destinations heavily relies on the quality of local attractions and the active support that host communities provide for tourism (Fong

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et al., 2017; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011). Extant literature suggests that residents act as informal actors working together in a community that serves as a socio-organisational framework (Firey, 1948; M. Y. Wu, Wu, Li, & Tong, 2022) where their views and actions can significantly influence the trajectory of tourism development. According to Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2011), host communities generally support tourism due to its perceived socioeconomic benefits; however, tourism industry can also exert substantial amount of pressure on residents, their culture, and their traditional ways of life, and this can in turn affect the perception of the residents towards tourism. Because of this, deciphering the underlying drivers of community support for tourism has emerged as a critical research priority in contemporary tourism literature (Han et al. 2023; Lyngdoh 2022; Pham et al. 2019).

Beyond socioeconomic factors, the spatial and inherent characteristics of a destination also play a pivotal role in shaping Residents' Support for Tourism. Among these characteristics, place distinctiveness refers to the degree to which residents perceive their locality as unique compared to alternative destinations (Boley et al., 2018). When individuals view their community as distinct or unique, it fosters a heightened sense of place attachment, a sense of pride, and a willingness to safeguard local assets (Breakwell, 2015; Proshansky et al., 1983; Wang & Xu, 2015).

Protecting and supporting behaviours are conceptualised as voluntary dimensions of Community Citizenship Behaviours (CCB). CCBs are discretionary actions exhibited by residents that facilitate the overall growth of the community and contribute towards tourism development without explicitly expecting rewards (Wu et al. 2022; Ying et al. 2015; Zhang and Xu 2019). Several dimensions of CCB have been explored in previous studies; these constructs are a contrast to those of OCBs, which are structurally adapted to fit the community setting (M. Y. Wu, Wu, Li, & Tong, 2022). CCBs matter in community-based tourism with distinctive features because they could explain why residents voluntarily help in keeping the destination sustainable, and such behaviours could stem from the way the residents feel proud about their place's uniqueness or special features, which leads to their voluntary support for their community (Wu et al., 2024).

The Living Root Bridges (LRBs) of Meghalaya represent an example of a destination where uniqueness and community actions are interlinked. The bridges are manually grown from *Ficus elastica* aerial tree roots by Khasi communities and show their traditional knowledge and connection with nature (Maurya et al., 2023). Consequently, the maintenance and preservation of these bridges are viewed as a shared cultural responsibility (Middleton et al., 2020; Shankar, 2015). Currently, the Living Root Bridges have attracted global attention (Lyngkhohi, 2022). However, empirical research on tourism support largely focus on economic and social exchange frameworks, with

less attention given to how Place Distinctiveness influences Tourism Support through Community Citizenship Behaviours (CCBs), particularly Protecting Behaviour and Supporting Behaviour in an indigenous tourism setting such as the Living Root Bridges (LRBs) communities of Meghalaya.

To provide a comprehensive understanding of how residents balance the need to sustain local resources that make the place unique with the desire to support tourism growth, this study operationalises on how Protecting Behaviour captures residents' efforts to preserve natural and cultural resources, while Supporting Behaviour reflects their active participation and encouragement toward tourism development. These behaviours are complementary, as one focuses on conservation and sustainability, while the other supports socio-economic development, and together, Protecting and Supporting Behaviour could also contribute to the overall Tourism Support in a distinctive rural environment like the communities around the LRBs. Therefore, this research contributes to contemporary tourism literature by empirically examining how distinct mediating mechanisms of Place Distinctiveness influences Residents' Support for Tourism through CCB dimensions such as Protecting and Supporting Behaviour.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Place Distinctiveness

Place Distinctiveness is a cognitive construct reflecting the perceptions of residents of their locality as unique relative to other geographic spaces (Wang & Xu, 2015). This perception enables individuals to identify themselves with their immediate surroundings and their identity with associate with special characteristics of that place (Breakwell 2015). This is supported by Distinctiveness theory, which posits that individuals define their environment through its most salient and valuable features (McGuire 1999). Similarly, Social Identity theory suggests that belonging to a distinctive group or place bolsters collective pride and individual self-esteem among people (Hogg et al., 1995; Tajfel, 1982).

Previous studies suggest that perceptions of uniqueness reinforce residents' emotional attachment and heighten the sense of responsibility toward their community (Stylidis, 2018; Williams & Vaske, 2003). However, the concept of Place Distinctiveness does not inherently extend beyond residents' sense of uniqueness about their place. It does not explain the broader emotional spectrum or the residents' overall perception of a destination.

Within the tourism literature, Place Distinctiveness has been associated with cultural preservation, destination improvement and positive resident's attitude towards tourism development (Boley et al., 2018; Wang & Xu, 2015).

Studies show that residents who attribute high value to the uniqueness of their community are more inclined to support tourism and conservation initiatives (Boley et al., 2018).

Although previous research has linked Place Distinctiveness with residents' attitudes and attachment, limited research has explored how it influences specific community-based behaviours, particularly in highly distinctive destinations and unique indigenous tourism destinations such as the Living Root Bridge communities.

2.2. Community Citizenship Behaviour (CCB)

Place Distinctiveness may encourage voluntary community-based behaviours that directly benefit the community. In management and tourism literature these discretionary behaviours have been conceptualised as Community Citizenship Behaviour (CCB). This concept originated from Organisational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB), which refers to voluntary actions that go beyond formal responsibilities and contribute to the overall functioning of the organisation without expecting rewards (Organ, 1988). Over time, OCB has been adapted to different organisational contexts, and its structural dimensions are often modified to suit specific environments (Joe & Lin, 2008; Puzi et al., 2025; M. Y. Wu, Wu, Li, & Tong, 2022; L. Yong et al., 2011). Prominent examples include Virtual Community Citizenship Behaviour (L. Yong et al., 2011) and Online Community Citizenship Behaviour (Chiu et al. 2015; Joe and Lin 2008), where individuals voluntarily contribute to enrich online communities and social platforms.

The adaptation of OCB into the community setting is supported by Firey, (1948) definition of informal organisation. Communities can function as informal organisations because they are formed naturally through shared interests and social interactions. Extending this perspective, Wu et al. (2022) conceptualised communities as informal organisations and their residents as employees, collectively working together towards common community goals. Contemporary studies similarly suggest that residents voluntarily contribute to their community's well-being and tourism development, thus adapting OCB to community and tourism settings (Ginting et al. 2022; Ginting & Wahid 2016; Gu & Ryan 2008; Wu et al. 2022; Ying et al. 2015).

In the tourism context, CCB refers to the voluntary and positive actions residents take to support tourism and their community, without expecting any rewards (M. Y. Wu, Wu, Li, & Tong, 2022). In tourism communities, residents collectively function like an informal organisation, where they share common goals such as protecting local culture and customs and managing visitors properly (Firey, 1948; M. Y. Wu, Wu, Li, & Tong, 2022).

In previous studies, researchers have identified several dimensions of CCB, including Helping, Involving, Recommending, Protecting, Supporting, and Tolerant Behaviours (Chiu, Fang, et al., 2015; M. Y. Wu, Wu, Li, & Tong, 2022; M. Y. Wu, Wu, Li, Wang, et al., 2022; Yin et al., 2023). Among these, protecting and supporting behaviours are particularly important in community-based tourism because they reflect residents' willingness to preserve local resources while actively encouraging tourism development and community progress (Lu et al., 2024).

Although CCB has gained attention in tourism research, existing studies mainly focused on urban or general tourism settings. Empirical research on community citizenship behaviour remains limited, particularly in highly distinctive destinations leaving a distinct gap in how these behaviours manifest in highly unique, indigenous destinations.

2.3. Place Distinctiveness and CCB

Place distinctiveness is intrinsically related to the manifestation of Community Citizenship Behaviour (CCB). Drawing on McGuire's Distinctiveness Theory (McGuire, 1999), Place Distinctiveness plays an important role in shaping CCB, because when residents perceive their community as distinctive or special, they may develop a heightened sense of place identity, collective pride, self-esteem, and sense of responsibility which can motivate them to voluntarily act in ways that benefit the broader community. For instance, place image, which refers to residents' perception regarding their community's characteristics, which is a related concept to Place Distinctiveness, has been found to positively influence community behaviour towards support for tourism (Stylidis et al. 2014). Similarly, place attachment frameworks demonstrate that when residents feel attached to a unique place, they become more willing to engage in behaviours that benefit their community and support tourism development (Truong et al. 2018; Zhang and Xu 2019). Hence, Place Distinctiveness, which refers to a resident's sense of their community's uniqueness, can also motivate residents to engage in CCB that supports tourism (Boley et al. 2018; Wang 2016). This suggests that when residents perceive a place as distinctive, they may exhibit voluntary behaviours that protect local resources, maintain traditions, or educate visitors about local culture while also supporting visitors visiting their place (M. Y. Wu, Wu, Li, & Tong, 2022).

These findings suggest that the perceived uniqueness of a place can encourage pro-social and supportive behaviours that contribute towards community support and support tourism development (Wang, 2016). However, empirical research examining Place Distinctiveness as a direct antecedent of specific dimensions of Community Citizenship Behaviour remains limited, particularly within indigenous and rural tourism settings.

2.4. Protecting Behaviours, Supporting Behaviours, and Support for Tourism

Protecting behaviour refers to residents' discretionary actions aimed at safeguarding and preserving the natural environment, alongside the cultural heritage and traditions of their society. For Example, looking after heritage sites, keeping the area clean, not damaging the environment, and making sure local traditions are passed on to the next generation. (Prayag et al., 2020; M. Y. Wu, Wu, Li, & Tong, 2022; Zhang & Xu, 2019).

Supporting Behaviours are the behaviours that encourage, assist, and promote the development of their community and tourism without the expectation of formal rewards (Wu et al. 2022). Being supportive means that the residents get involved in sharing ideas with the community, giving suggestions or feedback to enhance the community and the surroundings, and volunteering to help the society. In the tourism context, it also includes having a positive mindset, where residents feel that development and more visitors can bring benefits to the community in the future. (Boley et al. 2018; Gannon et al. 2021; Ying et al. 2015).

Support for Tourism refers to whether residents agree with and are willing to take part in tourism development (Boley et al. 2018). It is an important aspect in tourism research because, without community support, there is no tourism development (Boley and Strzelecka 2016; Lee 2013).

Protecting and Supporting Behaviours are important dimensions of Community Citizenship Behaviour in tourism because they are complementary. One focuses on preserving local resources and sustainability, while the other encourages tourism development and community progress. Moreover, there are limited studies that have examined Protecting and Supporting Behaviours as direct predictors of Support for Tourism and Place Distinctiveness as a behavioural antecedent, especially in an indigenous and rural tourism context, such as the Living Root Bridges (LRBs) communities of Meghalaya. Therefore, this study examines how Place Distinctiveness influences Protecting and Supporting Behaviours and how these behaviours contribute to Support for Tourism in the Living Root Bridges communities of Meghalaya. Based on these gaps in the literature, the following objectives guide the study.

1. To examine how Place Distinctiveness influences Community Citizenship Behaviours (Protecting and Supporting Behaviours).
2. To analyse the effect of these behaviours on Support for Tourism.

And, based on these objectives, the four hypotheses were proposed:

H1: Place Distinctiveness (PD) positively influences Protecting Behaviours (PB).

H2: Place Distinctiveness (PD) positively influences Supporting Behaviours (SB).

H3: Protecting Behaviours (PB) positively influence Support for Tourism (SFT).

H4: Supporting Behaviours (SB) positively influence Support for Tourism (SFT).

3. Methods

3.1. Study Area

The relationship between place distinctiveness, Supporting Behaviours, Protecting Behaviours, and support for tourism was tested in the rural areas of Tyrna and Nongriat, Meghalaya, India.

Nongriat is a small village situated in the southern part of the East Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya, which is a state in north-eastern India. The village is widely recognised for its Living Root Bridges, the bio-engineering structures which span across riverbanks. Notably, the iconic double-decker root bridge has captivated substantial tourist interest. It is a destination for adventurous tourists seeking thrills, yet with safe, well-mapped trekking routes around the periphery, which lead to beautiful natural turquoise swimming pools, waterfalls, and living root bridges. To access Nongriat, visitors typically begin their trek from Lumsophie village within Tyrna Elaka (Region) and descend approximately 3000 steps down a ravine before crossing suspension bridges over rivers. Tyrna Elaka also hosts living root bridges, some of which are not open to the public as they are still in the developmental stage. Together, Tyrna and Nongriat provide visitors with an integrated tourism experience characterised by natural beauty. Visitors are also drawn towards the hospitality and stewardship demonstrated by surrounding communities. These characteristics make the area an appropriate setting for examining Place Distinctiveness, Community Citizenship Behaviour, and Tourism support within an indigenous tourism setting.

3.2. Research Design and Sampling Procedure

This research adopted a quantitative cross-sectional research design. Data were collected from residents of Tyrna and Nongriat who were familiar with tourism activities in the villages. A systematic random sampling technique was employed to select respondents. Households and individuals available during the data collection period were approached systematically at regular intervals within the villages. To adhere to ethical research protocols, all potential participants were informed of the study's purely academic purpose, its voluntary nature, and data anonymity safeguards before providing informed consent to complete the questionnaire.

3.3. Measurement Scales and Data Collection

A structured questionnaire was used for data collection, and a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) measured the items following previous tourism and behavioural studies, such as Koo & Yang (2025). The measurement items were adapted from scales that were previously validated and contextualized to fit the specific setting of the living root bridge communities. Place Distinctiveness was measured using the scale developed by Wang and Xu (2015). Protecting and Supporting Behaviour were adapted from the scale developed by Wu et al. (2022). Support for Tourism (SFT) was measured using the scale developed by Boley and Strzelecka (2016).

The questionnaire was designed to collect information, such as gender, age, education level, occupation, and length of residency. This demographic study helps in describing the nature of the sample so they can support the interpretation of the study.

To determine the sample size, the study followed recommendations for multivariate statistical analysis. According to Hair et al. (2019), a minimum sample size of at least 5–10 respondents per measurement item is considered appropriate for behavioural research involving regression analysis. The final sample of 152 was therefore considered adequate for statistical analysis conducted in the study.

3.4. Data Analysis Technique

IBM SPSS Statistics version 20 was used to conduct the data analysis. Following preliminary screening of the data, 152 responses were retained for analysis. To describe the demographic characteristics of the respondents, frequency and percentages were used. Descriptive statistics such as Mean and Standard Deviation were used to find the average score and consensus of the main variables. Cronbach's alpha was employed to evaluate the consistency of the tested items. Pearson Correlation was used to examine the strength of the relationship between the studied variables, and finally, multiple regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses, and determine how Place Distinctiveness, Protecting Behaviour, and Supporting Behaviour influence Support for Tourism.

4. Results

4.1 Respondent Profile

Table 1 presents the Demographic representatives of the respondents. 65.8% of the respondents were males, while 34.2% were females. Respondents over 35 years were the largest group, accounting for over 43.4% of the sample, followed by those aged 25–35 years (28.9%) and 18–25 years (25.7%).

Respondents engaged in tourism-related activities were the largest portion of the sample (42.1%), followed by small businesses (30.3%), while (27.6%) of the population was engaged in other occupations. In terms of the length of the respondent's residency, the majority of them (96.7%) had lived in the area for more than 10 years. This indicates that the residents are familiar with the community and tourism activities.

Table 1: Sample profile

Variable	Category	%
Gender	Male	65.8
	Female	34.2
Age	18-25	25.7
	25-35	28.9
	35+	43.4
Occupation	Tourism-related	42.1
	Small businesses	30.3
	Others	27.6
Residency	>10 years	96.7

4.2. Descriptive Statistics

In Table 2 The results indicate that the respondents responded positively to the variables in the study. SFT has the highest recorded average score ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 0.54$), indicating a strong sense of support for tourism development. PB was also rated positively ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.51$). Similarly, PD ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.65$) and SB ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.65$) also had high average scores. The low standard deviation values across all variables show a low level of response variation. This suggests that respondents shared similar perceptions regarding the study constructs.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD
Place Distinctiveness (PD)	4.42	0.65
Protecting Behaviour (PB)	4.58	0.51
Supporting Behaviour (SB)	4.40	0.65
Support for Tourism (SFT)	4.65	0.54

4.3. Reliability Analysis

Reliability analysis is employed to determine whether the constructs are internally consistent. Using Cronbach's alpha value, the reliability analysis of the study is presented in Table 3

The number of items and the Cronbach's alpha value of each item are presented in the results. PD (0.771), PB (0.724), SB (0.824), and SFT (0.895). The values exceed the recommended threshold (0.70); hence, the measurement scales were considered reliable for further statistical analysis.

Table 3: Reliability Analysis of Study Constructs

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's α
Place Distinctiveness (PD)	3	0.771
Protecting Behaviour (PB)	4	0.724
Supporting Behaviour (SB)	5	0.824
Support for Tourism (SFT)	4	0.895

4.4. Correlation Analysis

Table 4 indicates the Pearson Correlation analysis results. PD showed a positive relationship towards PB ($r = .508$, $p < .01$), SB ($r = .573$, $p < .01$), and SFT ($r = .547$, $p < .01$).

PB also showed a significant positive relationship with SB ($r = .619$, $p < .01$) and SFT ($r = .553$, $p < .01$). SB demonstrated the strongest positive relationship with SFT ($r = .715$, $p < .01$).

Higher levels of PD, PB and SFT are associated with stronger support for tourism among residents. The findings indicate positive and significant relationships with all the variables.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	PD	PB	SB	SFT
PD	1	.508**	.573**	.547**
PB		1	.619**	.553**
SB			1	.715**
SFT				1

Note: PD = Place Distinctiveness; PB = Protecting Behaviour; SB = Supporting Behaviour; SFT = Support for Tourism.

4.5. Regression Analysis

In Table 5, to test the proposed hypotheses, multiple regression analysis was conducted. H1 proposed that PD positively influences PB. It is revealed that PD had a positive and significant effect on PB ($\beta = .508$, $p < .001$), explaining 25% of the variance in PB. Therefore, H1 was supported.

H2 proposed that PD positively influences SB. The result further shows PD also had a positive and significant effect on SB ($\beta = .573$, $p < .001$), explaining 32.9% of the variance in SB. Thus, H2 was supported.

H3 proposed that PB positively influences SFT. The result indicated that PB had a positive but relatively weak effect on SFT ($\beta = .179$, $p = .013$). Therefore, H3 was supported.

H4 proposed that SB positively influences SFT. The result showed SB had a positive and significant effect on SFT ($\beta = .604$, $p < .001$). Thus, H4 was supported.

Overall, PB and SB together explain 53.1% of the variance in SFT ($R^2 = .531$). This indicates the model has good explanatory power.

Table 5: Results of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	R^2	p-value	Result
H1	PD $\rightarrow$ PB	0.508	0.25	<.001	Supported
H2	PD $\rightarrow$ SB	0.573	0.329	<.001	Supported
H3	PB $\rightarrow$ SFT	0.179	0.531	0.013	Supported
H4	SB $\rightarrow$ SFT	0.604	0.531	<.001	Supported

Note: PD = Place Distinctiveness; PB = Protecting Behaviour; SB = Supporting Behaviour; SFT = Support for Tourism.

5. Discussion

Overall, the study investigated the impact of Place Distinctiveness perceived by the residents living around the Living Root Bridges on Protecting Behaviour and Supporting Behaviour, and how these behaviours support tourism development. The findings provide theoretical and practical insights into how residents' perception of a distinctive tourism destination can encourage people's voluntary behaviour that can support sustainable tourism development.

Just as place attachment (Truong et al., 2018; Zhang & Xu, 2019) and place image (Stylidis et al., 2014) have previously been found to influence people's behaviour, the findings demonstrate that Place Distinctiveness can also motivate residents to engage in Community Citizenship Behaviours such as Protecting Behaviour and Supporting Behaviour. This suggests that residents' perceptions of uniqueness may strengthen their emotional and social connection to the place, which in turn encourages voluntary behaviours that benefit tourism development and community well-being. The Living Root Bridges are unique bio-engineered structures, with the majority of them existing in the southern regions of Meghalaya, India. The residents' engagement in Protecting and Supporting Behaviour reflects a strong relationship between Place Distinctiveness and positive voluntary community behaviours.

Theories such as the Distinctiveness Theory (McGuire, 1999), Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1982), and Place Identity theory (Proshansky et al., 1983), suggest that residents identify with the place and behave positively towards it. The findings extend the concept of Place Distinctiveness into the context of Community Citizenship Behaviour, which is directed towards Tourism support.

Perceiving the Living Root Bridges as distinctive, the residents feel responsible to protect the living tradition and the intergenerational knowledge of harnessing the roots of the *Ficus elastica* trees. These protective actions include maintaining cleanliness and preserving the surrounding environment, thus reflecting the role of cultural stewardship and intergenerational responsibility within the community. Residents view themselves as guardians and the custodians of these natural and cultural heritages, which are associated with the root bridges. The residents demonstrated supportive behaviours because there is a need to unify the community and support one another in adapting traditional practices to modern tourism practices. This behaviour suggests that tourism in rural destinations is viewed not only as an economic activity but also as a mechanism to protect and to preserve community identity.

Thus, the results revealed that both Protecting and Supporting Behaviours significantly and positively influence Support for Tourism. These relationships also align with previous studies, which suggest that residents who actively participate and engage in tourism activities are more likely to support tourism development (Boley et al., 2018; Gannon et al., 2021).

However, compared to Protecting Behaviour, Supporting Behaviour demonstrated a stronger effect. This could indicate that residents place greater importance on participation and community involvement in tourism development than on preservation activities alone.

Nevertheless, Protecting Behaviour also showed a significant positive relationship with Support for Tourism. This highlights that when tourism development aligns with environmental preservation, residents show their support for the long-term well-being of their community. Therefore, residents value tourism when the development contributes positively not only to the community's well-being but also towards maintaining the Living Root Bridges and surrounding environments (Prayag et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2022).

53% of the variance in Support for Tourism is explained in the model. The findings indicate that Protecting Behaviour and Supporting Behaviour are equally important predictors of Support for Tourism within a distinctive tourism destination like the Living Root Bridges communities. This study, therefore, contributes to rural tourism literature by demonstrating that

community citizenship behaviours play an important role in balancing tourism development with sustainability. The findings further suggest that residents perceive sustainable tourism as a means through which traditional practices and modern tourism development can co-exist. Although economic benefits are important, sustainability, cultural preservation, and community harmony are essential components for long-term tourism development.

6. Conclusion

Place Distinctiveness is an underlying factor that can motivate residents' positive behaviour in indigenous rural tourism destinations. It plays a vital role in encouraging residents to protect and support their community. This is true especially for highly distinctive and tourism-influenced places like the Living Root Bridges Communities. The findings indicate that residents of these communities exhibit high levels of voluntary citizenship behaviours, such as Protecting and Supporting Behaviour, which also influence tourism support. However, Supporting Behaviour has a stronger effect than Protecting Behaviour, suggesting that residents may heavily prioritize or have directly experienced the tangible social and economic benefits generated by tourism. Nevertheless, Protecting Behaviour is also relevant and important to residents so they can preserve and sustain the natural surroundings for the future.

This study demonstrates how residents' appreciation of nature, combined with their role as custodians of the Living Root Bridges, can contribute to sustainable tourism development without compromising environmental and cultural integrity.

6.1. Theoretical Contribution

This study makes several distinct contributions to sustainable tourism literature. It conceptualises place distinctiveness and relates it directly to Citizenship Behaviours, such as Protecting and Supporting Behaviours, rather than focussing exclusively on studying the attitudes of the residents or the emotional dimensions of place attachment, which have dominated past scholarship (Truong et al. 2018; Wang 2016; Wang & Xu 2015). This study demonstrates that a destination's perceived distinctiveness can actively drive actual Citizenship Behaviours.

Focusing on Protecting Behaviour and Supporting Behaviours as key dimensions in rural and indigenous tourism settings, this study contributes to the CCB literature. Moreover, this study supports the idea that a community can function just as an informal organisation, where Citizenship Behaviour is important for the overall success of the organisation (Firey 1948; Wu et al. 2022).

Finally, this study addresses a significant gap in empirical literature by focusing on the living root bridge communities, an under-researched, highly distinctive rural tourism setting where ecological systems, cultural heritage, and collective community actions are deeply intertwined.

6.2. Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer several actionable insights for policymakers, tourism planners, and local chiefs within the Living Root Bridge communities.

Awareness programs about the distinct heritage and culture of preserving the Living Root Bridges will significantly strengthen residents' support for tourism. Programs that celebrate local culture and traditions should be implemented by Local tourism authorities and village councils to educate residents about the cultural and ecological significance of the Living Root Bridges. This will encourage residents' participation and involvement, which would promote positive, supportive behaviours.

Schools and community centres can introduce indigenous knowledge on how to preserve, cultivate, and maintain the roots that form the bridges. Through this, intergenerational knowledge will be transferred across generations and continue within the communities.

Tourism planners can promote the destination along with the communities' way of living. This will help the residents and visitors to have a valuable exchange of insights, which can boost the pride and self-esteem of residents.

Community-based training programs focusing on sustainable tourism management, waste management, visitor interaction, and cultural preservation can encourage residents' participation in decision-making and planning. This will strengthen the residents' Supporting Behaviours.

Local chiefs and community leaders, along with tourism planners, can encourage storytelling initiatives where the locals can narrate the traditions and indigenous knowledge associated with the Living Root Bridges to the visitors. This will enhance the tourism experiences, at the same time, encourage more positive behaviours from the residents.

Visitor management strategies need to be established by tourism policy makers. Strategies such as limiting overcrowding during peak seasons and promoting responsible tourism practices. This will reduce environmental pressure on the Living Root Bridges and help in preserving their ecological and cultural value for future generations.

6.3. Limitations

Despite its contributions, the study has the following limitations that are acknowledged.

Cross-sectional data shows residents' opinions at that moment but their views might change with tourism development.

The geographic scope of the study covered only two villages where the Living Root Bridges are found, so the findings may possess limited generalizability to other communities across Meghalaya that manage similar bio-engineered structures under different socio-economic or administrative conditions.

Since the data relied entirely on self-reported measures, the findings may be susceptible to common method variance or social desirability bias.

Different demographic groups may see tourism and environmental protection differently. Perceptions of tourism and environmental preservation may vary significantly based on these factors, particularly between residents directly employed in the tourism sector and those who are not.

6.4. Future Research Directions

Future studies can build on this research in a few ways.

Longitudinal studies can provide evidence of how residents' views could change over time with the development of tourism.

Other dimensions of Community Citizenship Behaviour could be examined in the future within the indigenous and rural tourism settings (M. Y. Wu, Wu, Li, & Tong, 2022).

Comparative studies across different villages with Living Root Bridges would also be valuable.

Future studies can test mediation effects and explore if Place Distinctiveness directly influences Support for Tourism.

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