

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Tourism as a driver of economic and social development in underdeveloped regions

Rafael Robina-Ramírez¹  | Jesús Torrecilla-Pinero² |
Ana Leal-Solís¹ | Juan Antonio Pavón-Pérez³

¹Department of Business and Sociology, Universidad de Extremadura, Cáceres, Spain

²Civil Engineering Department, Universidad de Extremadura, Cáceres, Spain

³Department of Public Law, Universidad de Extremadura, Cáceres, Spain

Correspondence

Rafael Robina-Ramírez, Department of Business and Sociology, Universidad de Extremadura, Cáceres, Spain.

Email: rrobina@unex.es

Funding information

The publication of this work was possible thanks to funding from the European Regional Development Fund and the Consejería de Economía, Ciencia y Agenda Digital from Junta de Extremadura through grant GR21161.

Abstract

Cross-border cooperations have been usually approached by developing trade agreements between international regions to upgrade their socioeconomic conditions and promote international tourism flows in territories. However, little attention has been paid to the role that tourist companies play in underprivileged territories highly dependent on tourism. Through the theory of social exchange, theoretical implications can be drawn from those territories and compared with developed regions to understand what role tourism flow plays in the reciprocal attitude between tourist companies and visitors. Political implications force tourist authorities to involve companies in promoting their regional tourism resources through participatory tourism programmes. For this, the opinion of companies is strongly related to the tourism generated by the Parque Natural Tajo Internacional on both sides of the border between Spain and Portugal, who have participated in the research to develop tourism on both sides of the border. To collect the data, 126 interviews were carried out with companies among the 53 Spanish and Portuguese companies that participated in the research between January and June 2022. For data tabulation, version 3.26 of SmartPLS was used. The study concludes that social exchange policies that bring companies and residents closer together favour

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socioeconomic development in territories that have natural resources and are economically disadvantaged.

KEYWORDS

companies, social exchange, tourism, tourists, underprivileged territories

JEL CLASSIFICATION

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The management of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has provided exemplary lessons regarding the application of sustainable models of governance to overcome threatened tourist destinations (Robina-Ramírez, Leal-Solís, et al., 2022; Robina-Ramírez, Medina-Merodio, et al., 2021). The boom in sustainable tourism in recent years has generated wealth around environmentally protected areas (UNWTO, 2021). Protected areas are managed for multiple, often competing, goals including biodiversity conservation, community livelihoods and tourism (Nyaupane et al., 2022). However, interactions between humans and nature, among stakeholders and among environmental elements make it complex and variable, where the impacts of tourism management become an essential management variable (Robina-Ramírez, Isabel Sánchez-Hernández, & Díaz-Caro, 2021; Rodríguez-Pose, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022).

This is the case of the International Tagus Natural Park, which was named as such in Decree 187/2005, of July 26, called the Spanish Natural Resources Management Plan.

A general tourism system alone is not a viable enough solution to make rural industries more attractive to businesses and the visiting community (Sánchez-Oro, et al., 2021). It is the feedback from guests that is necessary to involve companies in promoting their own tourism resources (Lee, 2011; Robina-Ramírez, Sánchez, et al., 2022). This connection allows companies to participate in the tourism activities detailed in participatory tourism programmes (Leal-Solís & Robina-Ramírez, 2022; Nepal, 2000). Based on these interactive tourism methods, a distinctive pilot project has recently emerged in two Spanish tourist offices in the Parque Natural Tajo Internacional. Through the dissemination of tourist proposals, the tourist offices of Alcántara and Brozas have become the centre of participatory dynamics since April 2019. Since the pilot project began, two surveys have been organized. They measured the economic role played by tourism and social relations in these impoverished and subsidized towns. Such an initiative is well aligned with the tourism business and social exchange, which is vital to ensure and foster the stability of tourist visits to the territory (Ashworth & Goodall, 1988).

To improve the social and economic conditions of impoverished regions, the relation between companies and tourists has been widely discussed from the perspective of companies and tourists (Leal-Solís & Robina-Ramírez, 2022; Qu et al., 2022). However, little attention has been paid to the companies' perspective in developing territories (Stylidis & Terzidou, 2014). The company–tourist interaction is analysed in this work, from the social perspective based on socioeconomic strategies linked to the tourist destination (Elvekrok et al., 2022).

Based on the presentation of variables extracted from the literature and validated by the companies, this investigation studies the degree of contribution of the theory of social exchange to the socioeconomic growth of both the companies and the inhabitants of the territory under study. To originally ascertain the level of tourism impact on providing supplemented incomes from tourism on companies, a preliminary study was carried out on 18 private companies as well as in 11 Spanish and eight Portuguese municipalities on both sides of the park (see Table 1).

The tourism plan adds a new dimension of nurturing tourism decisions in economically disadvantaged territories based on companies and the personal opinion of guests (Sánchez Martín et al., 2020; Tosun, 2002). This also allows the design of long-term strategic theories in that destination (Mikhaylova et al., 2022). In discussions of over 2 hours



TABLE 1 Municipalities involved in the study from both sides of the border.

Spanish side	Portuguese side
Alcántara, Brozas, Carbajo, Cedillo, Herrera de Alcántara, Herrerueta, Mata de Alcántara, Membrio, Piedras Albas, Salorino, Santiago de Alcántara, Valencia de Alcántara, villa del Rey, Zarza la mayor.	Penamacor, Idanha-a-Nova, Castelo Branco, Segura, Vila Velha de Rodão, Monsanto, Penha Garcia e Indanha-a-Velha.



FIGURE 1 International Tagus Natural Park.

in length in the first week of February, the companies provided detailed information on what these variables meant in the context of the park. During the third week, 16 points were originally presented and discussed at the second meeting. According to the results, two elements were eliminated, and two reasons were argued. It is not only public institutions that maintain those services, and the undesirable economic and environmental side effects for companies are not significant enough on the site to be taken into account. Similarly, 12 items were corrected and modified. Eventually, the participants approved the list of attributes.

2 | BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

2.1 | Context of the research

The International Tagus Natural Park is in Extremadura (Spain), in the south-west corner of the Iberian Peninsula. It is bordered by the Spanish regions of Castile–Leon (to the north), Castile–La Mancha (to the east), Andalusia (to the south) and the Região Centro in the area of Portugal (to the south-east) (see Figure 1).

In the Portuguese territory, the park was declared a national park on 18 August 2000 (Decree 9/2000, *Declaração do Parque Natural do Tejo Internacional*). In the Spanish territory, however, it was declared a protected area somewhat later, on 7 July 2006 (Law 1/2006) (see Figure 2).

In 2012, the excellent working relationship between Spain and Portugal prompted both countries to sign a cooperation treaty that joined the natural parks on each side of the border, thus creating the International Tagus Natural Park. In 2016, it was declared a Transboundary Biosphere Reserve according to prior agreements signed by both countries. Its excellent natural conditions of oak forest in Extremadura and its orographic and landscape views make the park a privileged territory for the practice of all kinds of activities linked to nature (Robina-Ramírez et al., 2020).

The outstanding natural resources contrast with companies' economic resources within the region. The gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in the park in 2017 was the lowest in Spain, at 16.981€ per inhabitant, compared with the Spanish average of 27.558€ per inhabitant. In 2018, the Portuguese average for personal earning (PIBpc)

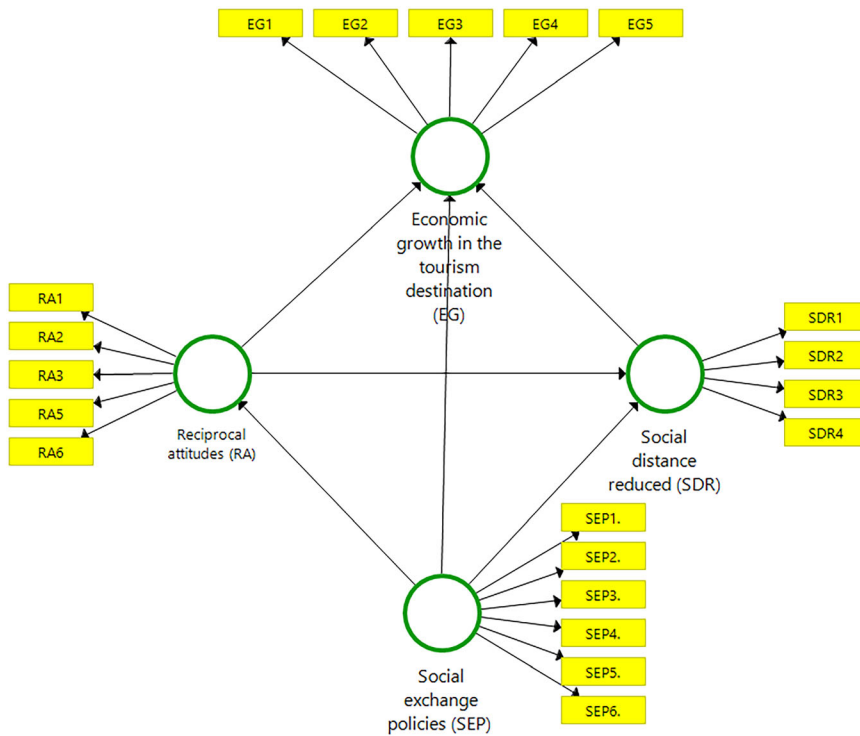


FIGURE 2 Model. Note: Socioeconomic growth in the tourism destination (EG), social exchange policies (SEPs), reciprocal attitudes (RAs), social distance reduced (SDR).

was 19.209,35€, compared with 13.100€ in the villages belonging to the park (Ramajo Hernández & Márquez Paniagua, 2018).

As the most impoverished region in both Spain and Portugal, its economy shows high unemployment rates, job insecurity, and loss of wealth and income (Lopes et al., 2022; Quinta-Nova & Ferreira, 2022; Sánchez-Martín et al., 2022). These negative variables have taken Extremadura to a greater loss of population in relative terms (with an inter-annual variation rate of -0.8% for 2016–2017) (INE, 2018).

In this uncertain economic scenario, tourism is a crucial factor to ensure the economic growth of Extremadura and Alentejo (Lopes et al., 2022; Nieto Masot et al., 2019; Pires, 2012).

2.2 | Economic growth (EG) in the tourism destination

In developing territories, tourist activities play a key role (Mikhaylova et al., 2022; Quinta-Nova & Ferreira, 2022). Tourists not only help to maintain companies' public services (Holloway & Humphreys, 2022) but generate better job opportunities or higher incomes for local businesses, which entice young people to remain at the destination (Benaraba et al., 2022; Lopes et al., 2022).

Incomes come not only from tourist activities but from local, regional, national and international touristic institutions (Adedoyin et al., 2022; Ana & Lubiński, 2019). To promote tourism at the International Tagus Natural Park, budget has been allocated to non-profit associations and institutions, local entities, associations of municipalities and local action groups. Although socioeconomic benefits might have undesirable side effects, this is not the case for Tajo/Tagus. Such side effects are more typical in crowded tourist destinations (Greco et al., 2018). In



underdeveloped tourist territories, the seasonal and unstable employment is higher at international parks due to the lack of financial, economic and structural resources (Huang & Li, 2022). For this reason, tourist companies in non-crowded destinations are more favourable to attend properly the tourist as potential income to them (Chuang, 2010; Lopes et al., 2021). Such local companies perceive a lower negative social and environmental impact of tourism (Castaño, 2005).

Similarly, the local workforce in impoverished territories does not fully benefit from the tourist activities (Sánchez et al., 2021). Foreign tourism companies are hired in tourist destinations instead of local ones (Tosun, 2002). As a result, the local community loses out on the benefits generated, which should be re-invested in the local destinations. According to the preliminary interviews, that perception is supported by 88% of Portuguese companies and 92% of Spanish ones. Several reasons to hire foreign companies were argued, including lack of skills, abilities and professional resources among local companies (Cartmel & Furlong, 2000; Robina-Ramírez, Sánchez, et al., 2022; Robina Ramírez & Fernández Portillo, 2020).

2.3 | Social exchange policies (SEPs)

Various studies have shown that the implementation of connection policies in destinations between tourism and the business sector has a strong impact on the development of the territory (Ferreira & Sánchez-Martín, 2022; Lopes et al., 2022; Torre & Wallet, 2016). The result of these policies has led not only to increase the standard of living of local inhabitants in disadvantaged territories (Li et al., 2022), but also to improve the return of tourists (Woosnam et al., 2022) and the satisfaction of tourists and companies (Andereck et al., 2005).

SEPs allow focusing on mutual benefits for the two parties that make up the “social contract” (Ap, 1992; Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018). This consists of developing a series of joint social commitments to develop institutions both socially and economically (Bunders & Akkerman, 2022; Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012). These social commitments will depend on factors external to the company – cultural, financial, environmental, political and legal – that affect the services provided by companies (Rasmi et al., 2014), as well as on internal factors that influence the values, emotions and behaviour of companies and tourists (Liu & Var, 1986).

Together with these, SEPs make it easier to discover the most suitable agents to carry out this social representation (Moscovici, 1981). The theory of social exchange also allows specifying which are the most outstanding singularities of each of the institutions for a better connection between the parties in the development of a territory (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012).

2.4 | Reciprocal attitudes (RAs)

Within the internal factors, the reciprocity between the parties is crucial not only to reach agreements, but also to improve the behaviour of both parties in the provision of the service (Stylidis & Terzidou, 2014). RAs are affected by traditional values (Kousis, 1989), which influence the companies' attitudes (Gergen, 1969), as well as by cultural and social elements. Thus, values and attitudes provide not only reciprocal behaviour (Emerson, 1976) but also a unique social relationship (Bunders & Akkerman, 2022; Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012), which provide satisfactory experiences to the tourist and reciprocity (Oliver & DeSarbo, 1988). In the work ‘Experiencing tourism, experiencing happiness?’ Stone (2012) explains that reciprocal attitudes improves when reciprocal happiness emerges. According to Ravina-Ripoll et al. (2021), happiness is linked to internal satisfaction which render positive attitudes. These attitudes are influenced by the social environment. Happiness and cultural tourism shape positive attitudes in the process of developing organizations by releasing positive and significant interactions in and out the organizations (Sanagustín-Fons et al., 2020).

These experiences generate positive emotions of mutual commitment and facilitate the fulfilment of specific objectives. According to Schwartz (1973), any external circumstance such as the development of a tourist destination



can influence the mutual responsibility of working together to achieve it through an assignment of responsibility by both parties (Eimermann et al., 2019). Through the standard activation model, some tourism destinations have been successfully developed (Han & Hwang, 2016).

This collaboration is especially necessary in less-developed tourist territories, where the ascription of responsibility and setting of norms is easier to understand to promote loyalty, trust, mutual respect and personal attitudes (Lepp, 2008). These attitudes, defined as a psychological tendency, move the parties to the social exchange to develop responsible behaviours towards the other party (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2000; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). That intrinsic cooperation also depends on the social distance between companies and tourists (Moufakkir, 2011).

2.5 | Social distance reduced (SDR)

In the relationship between the parties, the starting point is a social, economic, cultural or financial distance (Eimermann et al., 2019). The theory of social exchange seeks to reduce this distance from the origin or beginning of the relationship between the parties (Bai et al., 2022). The theory of social exchange analyses not only the reciprocity of this relationship, but also how to eliminate the obstacles that slow down the reciprocity of behaviours (Dierdorff & Rubin, 2022).

Any obstacle to the relationship between the parties causes an imbalance that affects the provision of the tourist service (Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003; Nicholas et al., 2009). A social distance defined by personal or social factors is created (Emerson, 1976; Mikhaylova et al., 2022) and affects the entire community (Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003).

The reduction of social distance makes it possible to adapt the response of one party to the other (Gouldner, 1960), leading to the formation of a 'popular belief' (Lerner, 1980), which describes how someone should behave and the reciprocal response that should be given (Moore, 2004). A successful social response produces satisfaction by responding appropriately to the other (Wang et al., 2003).

The reduction of social distance depends on the first company–tourist meeting. Depending on the type of information provided (Garrod et al., 2006) and the frequency and intensity of this tourist encounter (Woosnam et al., 2022), we speak of the elimination of social distance, passing to an 'intimate' social relationship that is genuinely perceived as more authentic (Cohen, 1979).

This relationship can end between the memorable and significant experiences of companies and guests (Musa et al., 2010), generating different types of attitudes between companies and tourists. While some tourists are more likely to interact with companies (Tucker, 2003), others avoid any interaction (Figueiredo, 2009; Robina-Ramírez, Medina-Merodio, & Estriegana, 2022). The type of character of the tourist must be analysed by the company (Giner & Espinosa, 1998) to avoid a bad connection (Bai et al., 2022).

3 | METHODOLOGY

3.1 | A methodological approach to social exchange theory

Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) pointed out that the development of research models based on the theory of social exchange (SE) must have qualitative and quantitative methods of study.

Although in many works quantitative scales derived from the theory of SE are applied directly to perform an interpretation of statistical data, it seldom includes the discursive contribution. This research addresses a specific contribution drawn from companies' involvement, validating items in their relationship with tourism, through in-depth interviews and focus groups (Sánchez-Oro & Robina Ramírez, 2020). This working method combines qualitative and quantitative proposals. The emic perspective represents the perception of the local natives of the tourist activity (Feleppa, 1986), which provides insight into how the local community thinks and acts.



3.2 | Sample and population

Due to a lack of resources, locals rely on public grants to start new businesses. In this scenario, tourism is a highly valued mechanism to bring supplemented incomes. The businesses that participated in this research study are detailed in Table 2.

TABLE 2 Participating research businesses.

Spanish side	Portuguese side
21 Spanish tourist companies: Centro de Interpretación Tajo Internacional P. N., San Benito de Alcántara, hotel Apartamentos Kantara Al-Saif, tourist Office of Alcántara, Alcántara Travel & Services, dream Cáceres, Barco del Tajo, hotel La posada, Rio Convento De La Luz, hotel Balneario de Brozas, Transporte Ramallete, Albergue de Cedillo, Macheira Agroturismo, Dehesa Tres Riveros, hotel rural sierra De San Pedro, La Venta del Membrillo, Escapadas Tajo Internacional, Puente del Infierno, El Jiniebro casa rural, Aventurax, autocares Paniagua	32 Portuguese tourist companies: Posto do Turismo, Beira Tours, Alforge, hotel Império do rei, Horta d'Alva, Alojamento Girassol-tourist house, Inatel de Castelo Branco, Bestravel, Agência Viagens - Empresa martins, Zé do Pipo, Agência Abreu, Turismo rural das Jardas, Lda, Guerin Castelo Branco, terminal Rodoviário de Castelo Branco, Raiatur-Empreendimentos Cinegetico-Turisticos, Lda., Europcar Castelo Branco, porta Raiana, Atlantis PMR Portugal, castle of Monsanto, casa das Jardas, casa d'Acha, Vamos Ò Manteigas, in Tours Portugal - Viagens e Turismo, Casa do Povo de Malpica do Tejo, Tasca Maria Faia, Café Maria do Monte, Sabores De Malpica-Produtos Alimentares, Lda, Arlindo Neves Vicente, casa D'Aldeia, Clickviaja.com , Castelo Branco, Nabais & Lopes Turismo Rural Lda, Posto de Turismo de Penha Garcia

TABLE 3 Demographic characteristics of respondents.

Gender	N = 126	%
Male	77	0.61
Female	49	0.39
No response	0	0.00
Total	126	1.00
Age, years		%
18–29	19	0.15
30–39	29	0.23
40–49	37	0.29
50–59	26	0.21
Over 60	15	0.12
No response	0	0.00
Total	126	1.00
Level of studies		%
Primary education	8	0.06
Secondary education	32	0.25
Bachelor's degree	69	0.55
Master's degree	17	0.13
No response	0	0.00
Total	126	1.00



3.3 | Demographic variables

In relation to the demographic variables, 56% of respondents were female, almost 80% were under 50 years of age, 57% were currently working and nearly 66% had only completed high school education. Table 3 presents the demographic data.

TABLE 4 Variables and measurement items.

Latent variables	Items
(EG) the economic growth in the tourism destination	EG1: Tourists help to maintain the companies' public services (Holloway & Humphreys, 2022). EG2: Tourism generates better job opportunities or higher incomes for local businesses (Leal-Solis & Robina-Ramírez, 2022; Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012). EG3: Economic growth entices young people to remain at the destination (Benaraba et al., 2022). EG4: The tourist destination must obtain income in a balanced way from both tourists and public companies (Adedoyin et al., 2022; Ana & Lubiński, 2019). EG5: The International Tagus Natural Park must promote local companies and workers (Lopes et al., 2022; Robina-Ramírez et al., 2020).
(SEP) social exchange policies	SEP 1: The implementation of connection policies between tourists and the business sector has a strong impact on the development of the territory (Ferreira & Sánchez-Martín, 2022; Lopes et al., 2022; Torre & Wallet, 2016). SEP2: The result of these policies has led to an increase in the standard of living of local inhabitants in disadvantaged territories (Sinkovics & Penz, 2009; Thyne et al., 2022). SEP3: Social exchange policies improve tourist return (Woosnam et al., 2022). SEP4: Social exchange policies allow to focus on joint social commitments to develop both institutions socially and economically (Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012). SEP5: Social exchange policies makes it easier to discover the most suitable agents and the best contributions of each company to carry out social interaction (Moscovici, 1981; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012).
Latent variables	Items
(RA) reciprocal attitudes	RB1: Reciprocity between the parties is crucial not only to reach agreements, but also to improve the behaviour of both in the provision of the service (Stylidis & Terzidou, 2014). RB2: Improvements in behaviour linked to satisfactory experiences received by tourists at the destination increase reciprocity (Oliver & DeSarbo, 1988). RB3: Collaboration is especially necessary in less-developed tourist territories (Lepp, 2008). RB4: Reciprocal attitudes are positively influenced by the values of both parties (Kousis, 1989).
(SDR) social distance reduced	SR1: The theory of social exchange analyses how to eliminate the obstacles or brakes that slow down or prevent the reciprocity of behaviours (Bai et al., 2022). SR2: Any brake or obstacle to the relationship between the parties causes an imbalance that affects the provision of the tourist service (Dierdorff & Rubin, 2022). SR3: The reduction of social distance allows adapting the response from one party to the other, developing memorable and significant experiences of companies and guests (Giner & Espinosa, 1998; Gouldner, 1960; Musa et al., 2010; Woosnam et al., 2022). SR4: A successful social response produces satisfaction by responding appropriately to the other (Mikhaylova et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2003).



3.4 | Latent variables and items

The latent variables and resulting items are presented in Table 4.

Variables are defined as the following:

- Economic growth (EG)*: The influence of tourist activities on the socioeconomic develop of companies.
- Social exchange policies (SEPs)*: Tourism programmes to introduce improvements in the development and current management of tourism, collecting opinions from both tourism companies and tourism initiatives at a private level.
- Reciprocal attitudes (RAs)*: The attitude of cooperation between companies and tourists, based on openness to new experiences.
- Social distance reduced (SDR)*: The process that individuals must follow to correspond socially during the tourist meeting of companies and tourists. The information provided to tourists, the type of activities, and the frequency and intensity of personal experiences are key factors in defining the type of social reciprocity.

From the questions delineated, a Likert scale was used based on Teye et al. (2002). The questions were validated by a group of 15 companies and 30 tourists that were randomly selected from five villages. No variation was implemented. In March 2022, 194 questionnaires were collected in 18 villages within the park.

3.5 | Conceptual model and hypothesis

The tourist-related plan, procedures and processes must be organized and monitored within the tourist system according to the expected cost and benefits provided to the companies. The conceptual model is shown in Figure 3.

The six hypotheses of the study are:

Hypothesis 1. Social exchange policies (SEPs) influence socioeconomic growth in the tourism destination (EG).

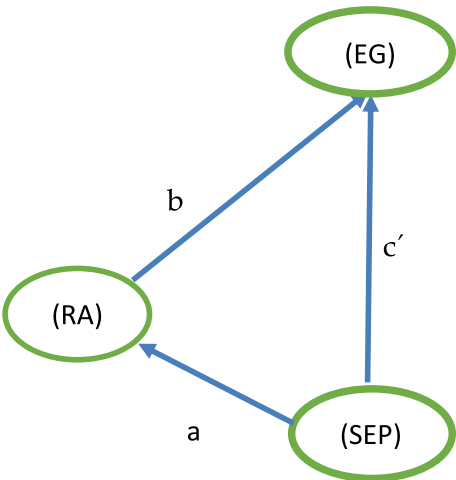


FIGURE 3 Mediation effect.



Hypothesis 2. Social exchange policies (SEPs) *influence* reciprocal attitudes (RAs).

Hypothesis 3. Reciprocal attitudes (RAs) *influence* socioeconomic growth in the tourism destination (EG).

Hypothesis 4. Reciprocal attitudes (RAs) *influence* social distance reduced (SDR).

Hypothesis 5. Social exchange policies (SEPs) *influence* social distance reduced (SDR).

Hypothesis 6. Social distance reduced (SDR) *influences* socioeconomic growth in the tourism destination (EG).

4 | RESULTS

A structural equation model (SEM) was used to explain the causes that lead the companies to perceive the tourist activity in the International Tagus Natural Park. This method is convenient when observable variables or indicators measured by latent variables are related (Sarstedt et al., 2016).

Partial least squares (PLS) path modelling is a well-established method for analysing structural equations, and it has been used by various researchers in organizations, business management and tourism (Fornell et al., 1990; Gray & Meister, 2004; Robina Ramirez & Pulido Fernández, 2018). PLS first determines the estimation of the measurement model and then the structural model (Chin et al., 2003; Fornell & Bookstein, 1982; Newkirk & Lederer, 2006).

This technique is less rigid concerning minimum requirements on sample size and the nature of the scales of measurement compared with other methods based on covariances (Chin et al., 2003; Fornell & Bookstein, 1982). To structure the data, SmartPLS software, version 3.2.3 was used (Ringle et al., 2015).

4.1 | Analysis of the measurement model

The measurement model, employing only reflective measures, yielded satisfactory results $\lambda < 0.7$ (Carmines & Zeller, 1979) (Table 5).

Table 6 reflects the parameters associated with the evaluation of the measurement model. All values of factor loads are greater than 0.5, a value considered acceptable by Barclay et al. (1995) and Chin (1998). Also, the values of the composite reliability and the average extracted variance (AVE) exceed the recommended limits of 0.7 and 0.5, respectively (Fornell & Larcker, 1981a). The values obtained to support the convergent validity of the scales were considered.

Discriminant validity was further confirmed by the Fornell and Larcker (1981b) method and the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) method (Henseler et al., 2014). In the first method, the discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the square root of each AVE in the diagonal with the correlation coefficients (off-diagonal) for each construct in the relevant rows and columns. To measure HTMT, Kline (2011) suggested a threshold of 0.85, whereas Teo et al. (2008) proposed a value of 0.90. The results exhibit satisfactory discriminant validity between the constructs (Table 7).

The values of the size of the effect (f^2) presented in Table 8 show that the model is accurate and that the constructs are important for the general adjustment of the model. Values of 0.02, 0.15 and 0.35 are considered as small, medium and large (Hair et al., 2014), respectively. The effects RA-EG (0.571) and SEP-RA (0.799) are considered large. Other effects are medium and small. Only one effect is not considered: SEP-SDR (0.013).



TABLE 5 Measurement model.

EG1	0.860	
EG2	0.817	
EG3	0.847	
EG4	0.861	
EG5	0.841	
RA1		0.860
RA2		0.907
RA3		0.816
RA5		0.754
RA6		0.805
SDR1		0.912
SDR2		0.883
SDR3		0.870
SDR4		0.860
SEP1	0.903	
SEP2	0.868	
SEP3	0.794	
SEP4	0.917	
SEP5	0.761	
SEP6	0.865	

TABLE 6 Reliability, validity of the constructs.

	Alfa de Cronbach	rho_A	Composite reliability	Extracted average variance (AVE)
(EG)	0.900	0.901	0.926	0.715
(SEP)	0.924	0.929	0.941	0.728
(RA)	0.886	0.892	0.917	0.689
(SDR)	0.904	0.911	0.933	0.777

TABLE 7 Fornell and Lacker criterion and HTMT.

Fornell and Lacker criterion					Heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT)			
Constructs	(EG)	(SEP)	(RA)	(SDR)	(EG)	(SEP)	(RA)	(SDR)
(EG)	0.846							
(SEP)	0.628	0.853			0.686			
(RA)	0.796	0.666	0.830		0.840	0.738		
(SDR)	0.515	0.396	0.486	0.881	0.567	0.424	0.534	

4.2 | Analysis of the structural model

Once the convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement model was confirmed, the relations between constructs were tested, beginning by obtaining the different statistical parameters using the bootstrapping method

**TABLE 8** Effect size (f^2).

	(EG)	(SEP)	(RA)	(SDR)
(EG)				
(SEP)	0.040		0.799	0.013
(RA)	0.571			0.117
(SDR)	0.054			

TABLE 9 Path coefficients.

	β	Lower CI	Higher CI	t statistic	p-value
H1: (SEP) - > (EG)	0.156	-0.042	0.335	1,704	0.090
H2: (SEP) - > (RA)	0.666	0.563	0.774	12,590	0.000***
H3: (RA) - > (EG)	0.617	0.417	0.810	6,104	0.000***
H4: (RA) - > (SDR)	0.399	0.213	0.611	4,076	0.000***
H5: (SEP) - > (SDR)	0.130	-0.097	0.331	1,266	0.207
H6: (SDR) - > (EG)	0.154	0.011	0.311	1,993	0.048*

Note: $t(0.05, 4.999) = 1.645158499$, $t(0.01, 4.999) = 2.327094067$, $t(0.001, 4.999) = 3.091863446$ * $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, *** $P < 0.001$. ns. No significant based on $t(4999)$, one-tailed test.

TABLE 10 R^2 and Q^2 results.

Constructs	R^2	Q^2
(EG)	0.671	0.468
(RA)	0.444	0.300
(SDR)	0.245	0.178

TABLE 11 RA mediation effect between SEP and EG.

Coefficient Direct effects	Bootstrap 90% CI			
	Percentile (intervals)		BC (intervals)	
H1: c'	0.156	0.004	0.300	0.018
a	0.666	-0.047	0.318	0.448
b	0.399	0.023	0.290	0.026
Indirect effects		Percentile	BC	
H2: Axb	0.015	0.000	0.018	-0.002
				-0.006

VAF = 63%.

(5,000 subsamples). The support of the hypotheses was based on the sign, value and significance of the t -values in each of the path coefficients (β). As can be seen in Table 9, the four hypotheses H2, H3, H5 and H6 are significant, indicating the correlation effect between the latent variables.

According to Chin (1998), R^2 values of 0.67, 0.33 and 0.19 are considered as substantial, moderate and weak, respectively. The inner path model is described as substantial ($R^2 = 67.1$). This means that the economic growth in the tourism destination is substantially explained by the three exogenous variables: EG, RA and SDR.

The predictive relevance of dependent constructs was also found to be significant. It was obtained by calculating the value of Q^2 (cross-validated redundancy index) through 'blindfolding' (Tenenhaus et al., 2005). According to this criterion, if Q^2 (EG = 0.468) is greater than zero, the model has predictive capacity (Henseler et al., 2009) (Table 10).



To complete the analysis of the structural model, the goodness of fit (GoF) was calculated from the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) proposed by Hu and Bentler (1998). In our case, the value of SRMR is 0.65, which is below the 0.08 recommended by Henseler et al. (2015), so it can be said that the model has a good quality.

5 | DISCUSSION

This project studied the impact that the theory of social exchange has on territorial development as a result of tourist influx (Sánchez-Oro et al., 2021). Specifically, the work determined the importance for companies in the sector to improve the social relationship with tourists on both sides of the Spanish and Portuguese border within the Parque Natural Tajo Internacional (Lopes et al., 2022; Robina-Ramírez et al., 2020), creating the necessary feedback between tourists and businesses, thus involving both parties in the promotion of tourism resources (Leal-Solís & Robina-Ramírez, 2022; Lee, 2011).

In the opinion of 126 companies, the social exchange policies (SEPs), the development of reciprocal attitudes (RAs) and the effort to reduce the social distance (SDR) between companies and tourists would contribute to the socioeconomic growth of the territory (EG) (Lopes et al., 2022; Robina-Ramírez et al., 2020). The great explanatory capacity of the model ($R^2 = 67.1\%$) allows us to think that the social business–tourist exchange is a success factor for socioeconomically dynamizing the park (Robina-Ramírez et al., 2020). Similarly, the predictive capacity of the dependent variable (EG) ($Q^2 = 0.468$) provides compelling reasons to apply this model in international parks with similar socioeconomic conditions.

With regard to our hypotheses, H1 is not accepted, which indicates that there is no direct relationship between SEPs led by public administrations and economic growth. However, H2 and H3 are accepted. This leads us to analyse the mediation effect of the development of ‘reciprocal attitudes’ between companies and tourists as factors that could mediate between those policies and the economic growth of the territory.

Figure 3 shows the potential mediation effect of RA between SEP and EG. According to Nitzl et al. (2016), to analyse if there is a mediating effect of RA between the SEP and EG relationship, we first discover that path of the indirect effect (axb) and direct effect (c') are significant and both intervals do not contain the value of 0 (see Table 11). Thus, there is a partial and complementary mediation. According to Torre and Wallet (2016), the implementation of connection policies between tourists and the business sector would only have an impact on the development of the territory when ‘reciprocal actions’ have previously been developed and an attempt has been made to reduce social distance (SDR) between companies and tourists (Ferreira & Sánchez-Martín, 2022; Lopes et al., 2022).

Based on our findings, training in improving social exchange would help companies to focus on joint social commitments to socially and economically develop both institutions (Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012) ($SEP4 = 0.917$) and even to discover the most suitable agents and the best contributions of each company to carry out social interaction (Moscovici, 1981; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012) ($SEP5 = 0.761$). This conclusion is also justified by the significance of the results of our hypotheses, specifically H2, which shows a strong relationship between SEPs and RAs ($SEP \rightarrow RA: \beta = 0.666; t = 12.590$).

6 | CONCLUSIONS

6.1 | Theoretical implications

The territory of our study is one of the poorest areas in Europe, and it requires tourism initiatives that help supplement the income of its inhabitants (Lopes et al., 2022). This fact must be translated into social exchange policies that are the backbone in the management of the excellent natural, cultural and social resources of the territory (Benaraba et al., 2022; Holloway & Humphreys, 2022; Mikhaylova et al., 2022).



As the results show, SEPs facilitate the promotion of the numerous natural resources of the region (Li et al., 2022; Woosnam et al., 2022). Our results also allow us to discover the most suitable agents to carry out the task of increasing the social and economic wellbeing of the community (Bunders & Akkerman, 2022; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012). Therefore, this collaboration is especially necessary in disadvantaged destinations such as the one examined here.

But implementing such policies will not be a guarantee of success; rather, success requires a rapprochement between residents and companies in the sector (Robina-Ramírez et al., 2020). In other words, as Sinkovics and Penz (2009) propose, for there to be an increase in the socioeconomic wellbeing of the companies and the inhabitants who reside in the International Tagus Natural Park, there must be a satisfactory social exchange between both parties by reducing the social distance between them (Bai et al., 2022; Dierdorff & Rubin, 2022). This reciprocity between the parties is crucial not only to reach agreements, but also to improve the behaviour of both in the provision of the service (Sánchez-Oro et al., 2021; Styliadis & Terzidou, 2014).

6.2 | Practical implications

Theoretical conclusions lead us to establish a series of practical recommendations as a proposal for improvement for the socioeconomic revitalization of the territory. The first and most important is to establish a working group made up of representatives of all parties (political agents, residents and businessmen of the area). We also recommend carrying out activities between the parties outside the scope of work to strengthen ties. These activities might include fairs and promotional activities, as well as excursions that value the resources to be managed. We believe that transparent and truthful information on all the confirmed and possible impacts, both positive and negative, will be essential to establish a relationship of trust between all parties by developing a satisfactory touristic experience aligned with the pursuing of happiness in both parties (Sanagustín-Fons et al., 2020). In this way, carrying out these initiatives contributes to the creation of what is truly sustainable tourism, with a true balance between society, environment, and economy.

6.3 | Limitations

Limitations are essentially based on the methodology. Even though the paper's original intention was to involve Spanish and Portuguese touristic companies' managing directors, eventually the questionnaires were responded by senior workers in almost 50% of the samples. The second limitation has been the lack of knowledge about the social exchange theory. This has pushed the research team to provide some knowledge about it to the companies by interacting by Zoom with 40% of the companies before they responded to the questionnaire. The third limitation has been the lack of literature about the social exchange interaction and touristic planning. At the beginning, companies did not understand how social exchange could help them to develop economically, and that socially underdeveloped territories are dependent on tourism.

6.4 | Future lines of research

A new gap in the literature between the social exchange theory and the social and economic development of under-privilege territories is based on the role happiness plays in rendering better company–guest relationships in underdeveloped territories. This opens the door to a new research line based on analysing the degree of willingness of both parties to develop reciprocal attitudes in achieving happiness in rendering touristic services. The role of training in the acquisition of these attitudes should also be analysed.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is fair to mention the collaboration of tourist offices in the villages of Alcántara and Brozas, as well as the fruitful interaction with the Observatory of Tourism of the Regional Government of Extremadura. All of them have provided us all the necessary data to carry out the study.

ORCID

Rafael Robina-Ramírez  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7117-8645>

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How to cite this article: Robina-Ramírez, R., Torrecilla-Pinero, J., Leal-Solís, A., & Pavón-Pérez, J. A. (2023). Tourism as a driver of economic and social development in underdeveloped regions. *Regional Science Policy & Practice*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rsp3.12639>