Making Sense of Social Distance Through Intergroup Contact and Emotional Solidarity Theories

Shavneet Sharma, Ph.D.
Senior Lecturer, School of Business and Management
University of the South Pacific
shavneet.sharma@usp.ac.fj

Dimitrios Stylidis, Ph.D.
Professor, Tourism Development and Destination Promotion
Democritus University of Thrace
dstylidi@mst.duth.gr

Gurmeet Singh, Ph.D.
Head of the School of Business and Management
University of the South Pacific
gurmeet.singh@usp.ac.fj

Kyle Maurice Woosnam, Ph.D.
Professor, Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources
University of Georgia
woosnam@uga.edu

Background

- **Tourism and Social Sustainability**
  While Fiji's tourism industry is recovering strongly after the disruption, sustainable growth depends not only on visitor arrivals but also on **residents' social receptivity**.
- **The Problem of Social Distance**
  Social distance between residents and tourists weakens host–guest relationships, threatening long-term tourism harmony and sustainability, especially in culturally diverse and tourism-dependent settings like Fiji.
- **Why This Matters**
  - Traditional recovery plans often ignore residents' emotional and cultural perspectives.
  - Perceived cultural distance, lack of shared values, and poor-quality interactions can hinder emotional bonds with tourists.
- **Emerging Need**
  To ensure inclusive recovery, we must understand **how cultural perception and emotional solidarity** shape residents' willingness to engage with tourists.
- **Research Gap**
  Few studies explore the **interplay between cultural distance, shared experiences, and emotional factors** in shaping social distance.

Purpose of the Study

- This study investigates how **perceived cultural distance** shapes:
  - Shared beliefs and behaviors
  - Emotional solidarity (welcoming nature, emotional closeness, sympathetic understanding)
  - Proximal and distal social distance between residents and tourists
- Drawing on **Intergroup Contact Theory** and **Emotional Solidarity Theory**, the study aims to:
  - Understand the affective, cognitive, and behavioral mechanisms underlying resident–tourist engagement
  - Explore how residents' travel history moderates these relationships
- **Context**: Fiji – a multicultural, tourism-reliant small island state, where tourism recovery efforts must align with social inclusion and community values

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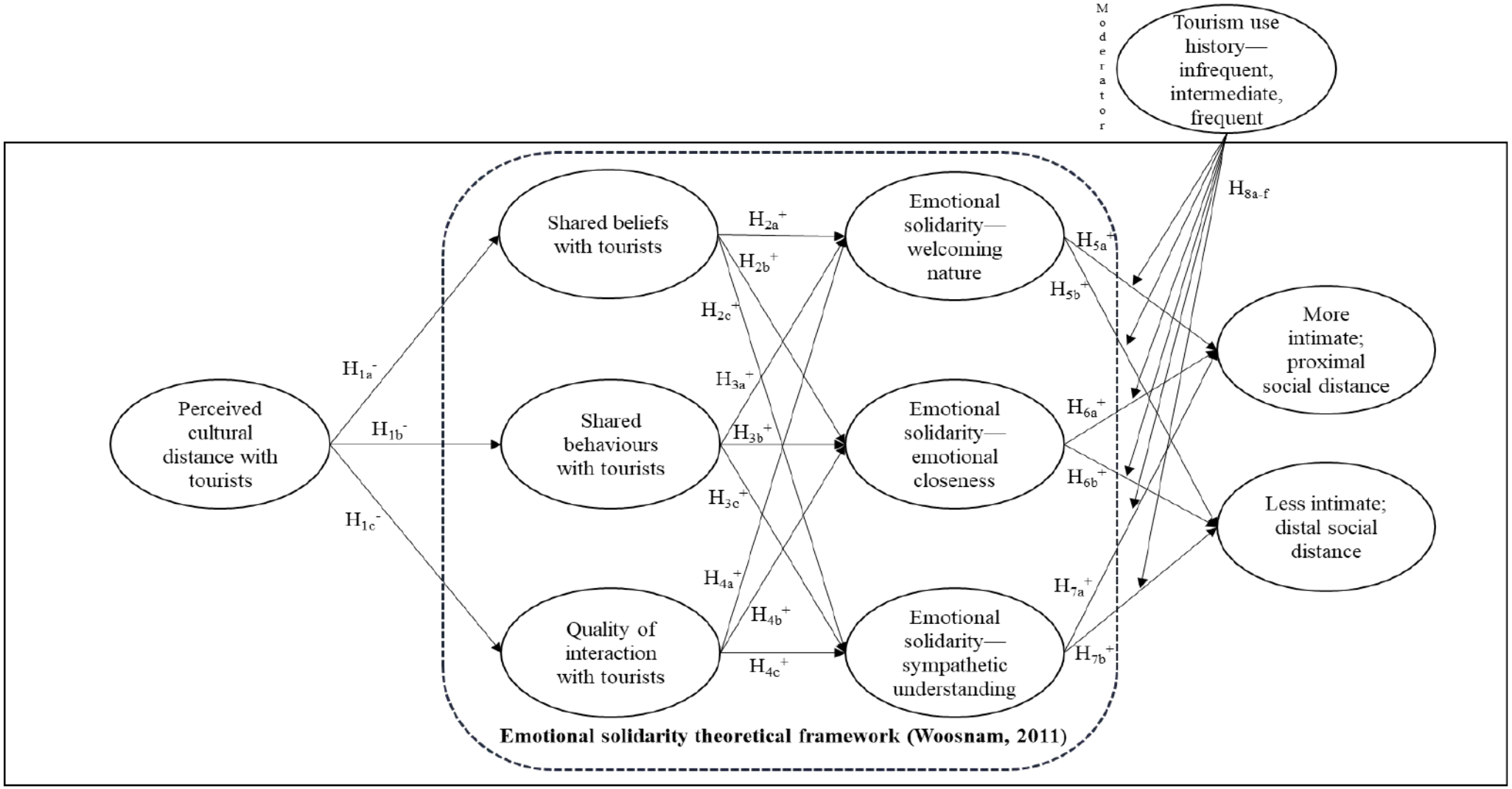
Conceptual model



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Methodology

Study Population

Residents of six demographically diverse urban and semi-urban locations in Fiji: Suva, Lautoka, Nadi, Sigatoka, Savusavu, and Labasa

Data Collection

- Mall intercept method used to gather responses in natural public settings
- Pilot-tested with 25 representative residents to refine instrument clarity

Sample and Procedure

- 419 responses collected via paper-based surveys
- Final sample size after data cleaning: 407

Analysis

- CB-SEM (AMOS v.29) used to test hypothesized relationships
- Reliability, validity, and moderation tested via SPSS and AMOS

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Demographic Profile

Characteristics	N	%
Gender		
Female	199	48.9
Male	208	51.1
Age		
18 - 24 years	87	21.4
25 - 34 years	92	22.6
35 - 44 years	76	18.7
45 - 54 years	62	15.2
55 - 64 years	47	11.6
65 and above	43	10.6
Education level		
Secondary school	88	21.6
Diploma/Certificate	82	20.1
Bachelor's degree	79	19.4
Postgraduate education	36	8.8
Others	122	30.0
Income level		
I do not earn an income	22	5.4
Under $15,000	86	21.1
$15,000-29,999	82	20.1
$30,000-44,999	78	19.2
$45,000-59,999	70	17.2
$60,000-74,999	47	11.5
$75,000-89,999	20	4.9
$90,000 or more	2	0.5

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Data Screening & Bias Checks

Data Screening

- **Missing Data**: <2%, handled via listwise deletion
- **Outliers**: Assessed using Mahalanobis distance; Likert scale use minimized extreme outliers
- **Normality**:
  - *Univariate*: Skew (0.15–1.84), Kurtosis (2.10–5.90) – within acceptable limits
  - *Multivariate*: Mardia's coefficient (Skew = 3.2, Kurtosis = 4.6) – acceptable for N = 407
- **Multicollinearity**:
  - VIFs = 1.21–2.87
  - Tolerance > 0.50

    ➤ *No multicollinearity issues detected*

Common Method Bias & Social Desirability

- **Procedural Controls**:
  - Anonymity, confidentiality, clear wording, reverse-coded items
- **Statistical Checks**:
  - Harman's One-Factor Test → 29.8% variance (<50%)
  - Inter-construct correlations <0.85
  - **Common Latent Factor** analysis → No significant model changes

    ➤ *Minimal impact of CMB or social desirability bias*

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Measurement Model Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

- **Estimation Method**: Maximum Likelihood Estimation (MLE)
- All items loaded significantly (≥ 0.68) on intended constructs → *Strong indicator reliability*
- Overall model fit:
  - $\chi^2/df = 1.98$, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.05
    → *Excellent model fit*

Convergent Validity

- **Composite Reliability (CR)**: All > 0.77 (Threshold: 0.70)
- **Average Variance Extracted (AVE)**: All > 0.50
  → *Evidence of internal consistency and convergent validity*
  (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2013)

Discriminant Validity

- **Fornell-Larcker Criteria**: √AVE > inter-construct correlations
- **Maximum Shared Variance (MSV)**: All AVEs > MSVs
- **HTMT Ratios**: All < 0.85 → *No discriminant validity issues*
  (Henseler et al., 2015)

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Hypotheses Testing

Direct Relationships

Hypothesis	β	*t*	*p*	LLCI	ULCI	Support
H8a	0.32	2.61	0.009	0.08	0.56	Partial Support
H8b	0.07	0.94	0.347	-0.08	0.22	Not Supported
H8c	0.11	1.39	0.166	-0.05	0.27	Not Supported
H8d	0.06	0.87	0.385	-0.07	0.19	Not Supported
H8e	0.09	1.18	0.239	-0.06	0.24	Not Supported
H8f	0.04	0.73	0.466	-0.09	0.17	Not Supported

Moderation Analysis

Key Finding

- **Welcoming Nature → Proximal Social Distance**
  - ➤ *Significant moderation by travel frequency*
  - ➤ Stronger effect among **frequent travellers**
  - ➤ **β = 0.32**, **p = 0.01** → *Partial support for H8a*

Non-Significant Effects

- No moderation found for:
  - **Emotional Closeness** → Proximal/Distal Social Distance
  - **Sympathetic Understanding** → Proximal/Distal Social Distance
    - ➤ *H8b to H8f not supported*

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Discussion of Key Findings

Cultural Distance Weakens Shared Experiences

- **Support for H1–H3**:
  - ➢ Perceived **cultural distance** negatively affects shared beliefs, behaviors, and interaction quality
  - ➢ Aligns with prior research highlighting cultural misfit as a **barrier to social cohesion**

Shared Behaviors Stronger Than Beliefs

- **Support for H4–H6**:
  - ➢ **Shared behaviors** (e.g., sightseeing, dining) had a greater influence on emotional solidarity than shared beliefs
  - ➢ Suggests that **everyday interactions** may be more impactful than abstract values

Emotional Closeness Reduces Social Distance

- **Support for H7a and H7b**:
  - ➢ **Emotional closeness** significantly reduced both **proximal** and **distal** social distance
  - ➢ **Welcoming nature** and **sympathetic understanding** reduced only **proximal** distance
  - ➢ Indicates **deep emotional bonds** are needed to shift long-term attitudes

Moderation: Limited Role of Travel History

- **Partial support for H8a**:
  - ➢ Residents with **frequent travel history** were more influenced by welcoming nature
  - ➢ No moderation effects found for other emotional solidarity dimensions → *Cultural exposure alone may not be enough*

Theoretical Implications

1. Advancing Intergroup Contact Theory

- Confirms that **perceived cultural distance** reduces shared experiences and interaction quality
- In multicultural, hospitality-driven contexts like Fiji, **communal norms** may **buffer negative effects** of cultural misfit
- Highlights **contextual importance** of cultural values in shaping contact outcomes

Refining Emotional Solidarity Theory

- Shows **distinct effects** across emotional solidarity dimensions:
  - **Emotional closeness** reduces both proximal & distal social distance
  - **Welcoming nature** and **sympathetic understanding** affect only proximal distance
- Challenges assumption that emotional solidarity is a **uniform construct**

3. Extending Self-Perception Theory

- Travel history predicted stronger social connection only for certain emotional dimensions
- Indicates **experiential exposure** influences **proximal openness**, not necessarily broader attitudinal change
- Reinforces the role of **self-concept and experience** in shaping intercultural behavior

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Practical Implications

For Tourism Authorities & Policymakers

- **Design inclusive cultural exchange programs** (e.g., festivals, community-led tours, storytelling) to foster shared beliefs and behaviors
- **Involve residents in tourism planning and recovery**, ensuring their voices shape tourism's social footprint
- Promote **policies that reduce cultural distance** and encourage everyday resident–tourist interaction

For Hospitality & Tourism Operators

- Implement **emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity training** for front-line staff
- Encourage **positive, everyday interactions** (e.g., shared dining spaces, guided local experiences) to build emotional solidarity
- Prioritize **experiential offerings** that reflect local traditions and foster resident pride

For Educators & Institutions

- Integrate **cross-cultural communication** and **emotional solidarity concepts** into tourism and hospitality curricula
- Offer **certification modules** and workshops on **social inclusion in tourism**
- Use **case-based teaching** to emphasize resident–tourist relational dynamics

Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

- Supports **SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities**
- Advances **SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions**
  - Promotes **social inclusiveness**
  - Fosters **mutual respect** and **intercultural harmony**
  - Builds **emotionally resilient tourism systems**

Limitations & Future Research

Limitations

- **Cross-sectional design**:
  ➤ Limits causal inferences — emotional and behavioral changes over time remain unexplored
- **Self-reported data**:
  ➤ Potential for social desirability and recall bias despite procedural and statistical controls
- **Context-specific**:
  ➤ Findings are rooted in the Fijian context — generalizability to other cultural or non-island tourism settings may be limited

Future Research Directions

- Conduct **longitudinal or experimental studies** to track changes in emotional solidarity and social distance over time
- Explore **additional moderators**, such as media influence, economic dependence, or intergroup anxiety
- Apply the model in **diverse geographical contexts** (e.g., urban, post-conflict, or over-touristed destinations) to assess cultural variability
- Investigate **tourists' perceptions** of social distance and solidarity to develop **bidirectional models**

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Questions?

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