



Unraveling the impact of perceived policy opacity and volatility on tour guides' return intentions: An extended TPB analysis in post-pandemic Suzhou

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ABSTRACT

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The severe shortage of foreign tour guides currently impedes the full recovery of inbound tourism in Suzhou. This study aims to explore the underlying mechanisms by which insecurity, caused by high Policy Opacity and Risk Volatility (PROP-V), influences guide return intentions. Utilizing a multi-language questionnaire based on semi-structured interviews, this research employed a Stratified Quota Sampling method considering pre-pandemic service experience, professional qualifications, and return intentions. A total of 552 tour guides working in Suzhou participated in the survey. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) validated an extended Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) model incorporating PROP-V. The findings reveal that PROP-V experienced the largest negative influence on Subjective Norms (SN) ($\beta = -0.552$). This erosion of social normative pressure subsequently led to diminished attitudes and perceived behavioral control, resulting in a significant decrease in return intentions. Practically, these results provide a theoretical justification for the extended TPB model in crisis contexts. The study suggests that, for China's post-COVID-19 inbound tourism workforce restoration, policymakers must prioritize transparency to rebuild the "social contract" and professional confidence, rather than relying solely on economic incentives.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by integrating PROP-V into the TPB framework, identifying that policy volatility primarily suppresses return intentions by eroding subjective norms rather than through direct deterrence.

1. INTRODUCTION

The expansion of global tourism has transformed international markets into essential economic drivers for countries worldwide. As a region rich in cultural heritage and with an established hospitality industry, Suzhou serves as a notable example of an inbound destination in China (Choi, Ritchie, Papandrea, & Bennett, 2010). Recent statistics confirm the scope of this activity: 2.617 million inbound visitors between January and October 2024 surpassed the region's total for the entire year of 2019. A significant increase in international tour guide shortages has compromised service quality. The pandemic caused a mass exodus of workers. Workforce attrition exceeding 60% contrasts with return rates stagnating below 50%. Daily operational loads for surviving guides surged by 53.3% compared to 2019 baselines (China Tourism News, 2025; Modern Express, 2024; Pengpai News, 2025; The World of Chinese, 2024). High turnover, low return rate, and financial instability are thus just the tip of the iceberg. What lurks beneath is a deeper structure that prevents post-pandemic re-entry: the perceived risks of policy opacity and policy volatility (Matiza, 2020; Ojeda-Joya & Romero, 2023).

The mechanisms through which PROP-V continues to suppress guide return remain sparsely explored. Extensive scholarship focuses on Policy Volatility's macro-economic effects (e.g., Hadi, Naeem, & Karim, 2023; Hailemariam & Dzhumashev, 2023). And a glaring vacuum exists in terms of micro-level pathways through which PROP-V shapes individuals' return intentions. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), in combination with PROP-V, lacks data to reflect its stability or predictive power in the post-pandemic atmosphere. This limitation reduces its explanatory capacity when investigating the risky behaviors of high-risk professionals (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Zhao, Meo, Ibrahim, Aziz, & Nathaniel, 2023). A similar lack prevails in an intervention study. Returns are supported by government backup (Novelli, Burgess, Jones, & Ritchie, 2018; Solís & Gil, 2024). And research from a more empirical standpoint has neglected evaluating what specific interventions -such as overseas route training or wage assurance-could ameliorate PROP-V's impacts (Galí, 2022; Ma, Zhang, Xu, Wang, & Kim, 2021).

Micro-mechanisms of occupational behavioral pathologies form the core of this discussion. Questionnaire design was informed by semi-structured interviews with pilot testing. Stratified quota sampling ensured representativeness through an experience-based, language capability, and service type quota system. Data collection covered active but career-switching individuals and those potentially returning from outside-national guides in Suzhou. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) validated an extended Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) model amended with PROP-V. The analysis underscores the precise pathway through which PROP-V influences return intention via perceived risk and subjective norms.

This article makes three specific contributions. First, PROP-V within TPB systematically unveils the micro-psychological mechanisms behind policy risk perception that sabotage return intentions. This fills an empirical gap concerning specific types of perceived risks that individuals consider when making career choices. Second, we demonstrate the reliability and predictive power of the extended TPB model in the post-pandemic context. Third, the identification of operative pathways behind policy risk perception and preference formation provides an empirical basis for policymakers aiming to address PROP-V through targeted interventions.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 covers the literature review and hypothesis development. Section 3 describes the methodology, including scale development and sample collection. Section 4 presents data findings and model validation. A discussion of the key results is provided in Section 5. Conclusions and policy recommendations are discussed in Section 6.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Key Concepts and Influencing Factors in Tour Guide Career Decisions

2.1.1. General Factors Influencing Tour Guide Career Choices

The importance of career planning is reflected in the selection of guides (Kong, Cheung, & Baum, 2009; Zeng, 2015). Vocational education and professional competence therein promote career development opportunities (Hu, Yuan, Wang, & Chen, 2024). The second core factor is job satisfaction. Organizational support has a mitigation effect on emotional labor, benefiting the worker's mental health (Wang, 2017). Maximization of their benefits (for guides and others) and working conditions boosts satisfaction. This elevation locks in career choices (Sujood, Ali, Arwab, & Hamid, 2023; Wang, 2017; Yan, Ma, & Zhang, 2023). Family support and sociocultural factors hold equal critical weight. Experienced guides backed by family demonstrate lower turnover intentions (Ren & Wong, 2021; Rui-jiang, Lei, & Na, 2019). Motivational factors and personality traits, including industry interest, professional identity, and extraversion collectively determine career entry (Ross, 1997).

Assumptions of macro-environmental stability ground most existing literature (Kong et al., 2009; Zeng, 2015). Structural impacts of external uncertainty have suffered long-term neglect. Post-pandemic realities expose model limitations. Organizational support and job satisfaction fail to explain the amplification of negative effects caused by policy fluctuations (Sujood et al., 2023; Wang, 2017; Yan et al., 2023). Systemic policy risks transcend personal

support networks. The collapse of family support frameworks characterizes high-uncertainty environments (Ren & Wong, 2021; Ross, 1997; Rui-jiang et al., 2019).

2.1.2. Perceived Risk and its Policy Drivers

2.1.2.1. Definition of Perceived Risk and Its Impact on Career Choice

Subjective assessments of negative event probabilities and consequences define perceived risk (Perotti & Cherian, 1999). Decision-making research applies this concept to uncertainty analysis (Weinstein, Healy, & Ender, 2002). Judgments regarding job security, income stability, and development prospects are closely linked to perceived risks in career contexts (Aloudat, 2017). Crisis mechanisms have become a focal point in tourism studies (Galí, 2022). In order to minimize occupational instability, individuals face increased exposure to environmental uncertainties (Chaudhary & Islam, 2025). The threat of health risks accelerates the departure from professions with high contact (Bin et al., 2024). Economic volatility pushes people to adopt safe ways (Abror et al., 2022). The severity of the impact from this is especially significant for guides. The multidimensionality of risks is complicated by an increasing number of decision-making factors, which can effectively reshape behavioral orientations in the post-pandemic era (Kaushik & Chakrabarti, 2018). Income instability and an uncertain future expose people to higher perceived risks (Aloudat, 2017). High levels of uncertainty in health and the economy weaken intentions to enter international markets (Anzani, Rahmiati, Chairy, & Purwanto, 2022; Hu & Bentler, 1999). Poor occupational security interacts with policy uncertainty, increasing risk perception. This interaction motivates guides to look inward (Liu & Huang, 2023; Ren & Wong, 2021).

Negative shocks from risks to career decisions are affirmed (Chaudhary & Islam, 2025; Galí, 2022). Most studies apply a single-risk construct. The heterogeneity of risk sources (e.g., policy-driven) is not discussed (Aloudat, 2017). Studies on health and economic risks often neglect to explain the role of institutions. The amplification of risks due to opacity and volatility is rarely analyzed in detail (Abror et al., 2022; Bin et al., 2024). Post-pandemic generalizability is therefore limited (Anzani et al., 2022; Kaushik & Chakrabarti, 2018).

2.1.2.2. Policy Opacity and Perceived Risk

Policy transparency is characterized by a lack of definability, predictability, and clarity in the creation and, most notably, the implementation of rules (Kuhn, 2000; Shamir & Arthur, 1989). Ambiguity and information asymmetry result in increased uncertainty. Vague policy data and a lack of communication significantly heighten perceptions of uncertainty. Politically and psychologically stressful conditions trigger erosion of commitment (Shamir & Arthur, 1989). Improved transparency improves the sense of professional safety (Abou-Shouk, Elbaz, & Maher, 2021; Galí, 2022). Post-pandemic clashes between central and local policy resulted in increased perceptions of opacity (Erul et al., 2023). Macro-transparency indexes (EPU) largely dominate current scholarship. Few empirical studies have explored the policy opacity risks on guides' level (Matiza, 2020). Macro-index techniques have identified uncertainty amplification. However, these macro approaches (Matiza, 2020) do not identify the underlying micro-psychological mechanisms (Abou-Shouk et al., 2021; Galí, 2022). The effect of stress pathways among guidance amid conflicts between the center and local authorities has yet to be examined (Erul et al., 2023; Matiza, 2020).

2.1.2.3. Policy Volatility and Perceived Risk

Policy volatility is characterized by frequent intertemporal jumps, discontinuities, or temporal absence of stability in policies (Trevor-Roberts, Parker, & Sandberg, 2019). Environmental uncertainty amplifies perceived risk and distorts decisions (Ferris, 1977; Zhao et al., 2023). Social instability is reinforced by frequent policy adjustments and sudden overturns. The consequent effect is the erosion of the commitment to professionalism. The industry is especially hard hit (Zhao et al., 2023). Guides' business uncertainty is directly amplified (Anzani et al., 2022; Yan et al., 2023). Destruction of long-term planning stability by Policy Volatility significantly weakens retention intentions

(Abou-Shouk et al., 2021). Macro-demand shocks dominate existing research. Empirical evidence revealing micro-pathways of volatility affecting return decisions is absent (Matiza, 2020). Planning disruption studies fail to integrate psychological mechanisms despite confirmed uncertainty reinforcement (Abou-Shouk et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2023).

2.1.3. Influence of Tourism Policy on Tour Guide Career Decisions

Decision uncertainty reduction relies on stable policy environments (Qiu, Park, Li, & Song, 2020; Wen, Kozak, Yang, & Liu, 2021). Consistent policies underpin occupational security establishment (Galí, 2022; Rutledge, 2023). Trust collapse stems from policy reversals and ambiguity (Whitehead & Wicker, 2020). Researchers (e.g., Aguiar-Quintana, Nguyen, Araujo-Cabrera, & Sanabria-Díaz, 2021; Hu et al., 2024; Ren & Wong, 2021; Zha, Dai, Ma, Chen, & Wang, 2021) observed that operational difficulty surged following frequent post-pandemic entry policy adjustments. Severe interference disrupted guidance on career expectations. Destination image suffered consequent damage (Aggarwal & Gour, 2020).

Attention has centered on direct policy shocks to career behavior (Feighery, 2011; Rey-Carmona, Núñez-Tabales, Durán-Román, & Pulido-Fernández, 2023; Zhao et al., 2023), and the significance of policy support is confirmed (Cao, Qu, Liu, & Hu, 2021; Hillman, Lamont, Scherrer, & Kennelly, 2021; Sigala, 2020). Significant research gaps nevertheless persist. Empirical verification of PROP-V suppression mechanisms on return intentions is lacking. Micro-evidence regarding risk mitigation via policy tools such as training and income guarantees is equally absent (Galí, 2022; Ma et al., 2021; Novelli et al., 2018; Solís & Gil, 2024). Descriptive studies dominate. Mediation mechanisms of policy uncertainty remain ignored (Aguiar-Quintana et al., 2021; Whitehead & Wicker, 2020).

2.2. Extended Theory of Planned Behavior

In Tourism, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), widely applied in explaining work intentions, is widely applied to explain the intentions of tourism professionals (Abou-Shouk, Zouair, Hewedi, & Badr, 2023; Ulker-Demirel & Ciftci, 2020; Yan et al., 2023). However, its original formulation assumes a relatively stable and manageable environment for decision-making, which appears to have been severely endangered by extreme environmental shocks (Liu, Wang, McCartney, & Wong, 2021; Şengel, Çevrimkaya, & Zengin, 2021).

Policy opacity and volatility represent fundamental factors that influence and transform individuals' psychological processes. They are not external circumstances (Huang, Shao, Zeng, Liu, & Li, 2021; Liu et al., 2021; Lu & Atadil, 2021; Ren, 2022; Ren & Wong, 2021). By introducing PROP-V as an antecedent variable, the theoretical limitation of an unexpanded model in post-pandemic contexts can be addressed. We revise the theory accordingly to establish verification pathways in which exogenous policy shocks transform insiders' psychological decision-making mechanisms in high-risk situations.

2.3. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

New waves of professional uncertainty and legal risks form the underlying mechanism behind PROP-V's weakening of Suzhou guides' positive attitude toward return. Ambiguity regarding the processing of visas and the varying regional health code standards clearly increased the operational risks of hosting international tourists during the pandemic. The erosion of professional enthusiasm followed (Wang et al., 2021). The foundation of trust and job satisfaction is undermined by policy opacity. Conversely, opacity significantly increases practitioners' psychological stress (Alrawadieh, 2021). The abrupt shifts in quarantine-related policies in Suzhou exposed the lethal impact of policy tumult. Professional planning and income stability are severely disrupted, exacerbating risk perception and job burnout. The study's conclusions align with findings from similar research, such as Gu, Ying, Zhang, and Tao (2020) and Wang et al. (2021). The physical labor involved in the work becomes increasingly difficult to justify. PROP-V's influence extends further beyond this, dismantling the psychological expectation of "effort-reward" and effectively

diminishing the cognitive valuation of the career. Despite their numbers returning to normal, policymakers' uncertainty continues to cause guides to exercise caution. Multifaceted service contexts exacerbate professionals' stress when dealing with multilingual clients (Bayuk & Patrick, 2021; W. Hu et al., 2024).

H₁: PROP-V negatively impacts tour guides' attitudes (AB) toward returning to the international market.

The tourism service industry primarily values travel agency managers, colleague guides, and guide associations as sources of subjective norms (SN) formation. Behavioral intentions are determined by the expectations and support of colleagues and institutions (Listiwati, Sulivyo, Dewi, & Arsadi, 2024). The primary mechanism behind PROP-V's negative influence on the Suzhou guides' Subjective Norms is weakened social support and expectations. Policy opacity regarding the mutual recognition of health codes has caused ambiguity, making all guidance from the Suzhou travel agencies a significant challenge. Subsequent expectations from colleagues and institutions to return to the international market have become weaker (Zhen, 2014). Constant policy changes regarding group tours' conditions and policies also became a source of insecurity about collective behavior during the pandemic. In turn, they weakened the Suzhou Guides' subjective norms (Ren & Wong, 2021; Xue, Jo, & Bonn, 2020). The guiding ecosystems of Suzhou, which operate predominantly on the basis of traditional cultural tourism, suffer significantly from social validation issues. The absence of consistent signals makes guides vulnerable to the influences of negative social validation (Shen, Schüttemeyer, & Braun, 2009). The conservative positions of guide associations and travel agencies amid policymakers' uncertainties contributed to the depletion of social support. The group tour market itself takes much longer to thrive. That's why the intent to return has become suppressed (Tapia-Ubeda, Isbej Muga, & Polanco-Lahoz, 2021).

H₂: PROP-V negatively affects tour guides' subjective norms (SN) regarding returning to the overseas market.

PROP-V undermined Suzhou guides' perceived behavioral control (PBC) by raising occupational barriers and creating uncertainty. Freelancers constitute the overwhelming majority of Suzhou guides. Policy opacity, such as vague visa regulations and varying health code requirements, heightened compliance challenges, further diminishing self-efficacy (Bayuk & Patrick, 2021). Yan et al. (2023) provide an example of rapid policy adjustment in Suzhou, illustrating policy volatility. This volatility eroded control over resources and professional stability, severely impairing perceived behavioral control (Yan et al., 2023). The lack of clear norms causing control reduction is empirically substantiated in the guide community of Suzhou. Poor interpretative standards among culturally significant sites exacerbate the problem (Shen et al., 2009). The reality of high-intensity workloads for guides in Suzhou is unmistakable; the group arrival numbers daily in 2024 have dwarfed those of a decade ago. Uncertainty regarding policy opacity and volatility has added to the hardships of returning. The difficulty in quickly adapting to the demands of international tourists is especially severe (Meen, Tijus, & Tu, 2020; Yan et al., 2023).

H₃: PROP-V negatively affects guides' perceived behavioral control (PBC) over successful return to the international market.

The positive attitude of Suzhou guides toward the return to the international market reinforces guides' perceived behavioral control (PBC) by increasing self-efficacy and professional confidence. The influx of inbound tourist arrivals contributed to the optimistic outlook for market recovery, enhancing guides' confidence in their ability to skillfully manage PROP-V obstacles (Armitage & Conner, 2001). The mechanism behind positive attitude, raising self-efficacy, and consequently, behavioral control, is affirmed by findings like Walchli (2007). The connection to the World Heritage, increasing professional responsibility and efficacy among Suzhou practitioners (Shen et al., 2009). A positive evaluation of career prospects, inspired guides to proactively acquire proficiency in unfamiliar policies and language, augmenting their adaptability and responsiveness to international tourists aligning with Meen et al. (2020).

H₄: Tour guides' attitude (AB) towards returning to the international market positively impacts guides' perceived behavioral control (PBC) over a successful return.

Social norms (SN) enrich Suzhou guides' PBC by offering social support and clear expectations (Heiny, Ajzen, Leonhäuser, & Schmidt, 2019). The guidance provided by travel agencies and guide associations, through policy interpretation and professional training, enhances resource access and crisis response capability (Li & Shi, 2022).

Social norms play a vital role in enhancing self-efficacy and behavioral control in a post-pandemic (high-uncertainty environment) (Baedeker et al., 2020; Chen, Loverio, & Shen, 2021). Given the deep connection of local culture with guide identity, SNs have an essential role in the cultural tourist scene of Suzhou (Shen et al., 2009). By supporting international itineraries, travel agencies demonstrate explicit confidence in their guides' professional competence. Providing explicit standardized service expectations and contingency measures strengthens perceived competence and increases behavioral control (Royle, 2010).

H₅: Social norms (SNs) positively influence guides' perceived behavioral control (PBC) over a successful return to the international market.

Social norms (SNs) positively contribute to guiding guides' attitudes towards returning to the international market through expectations and social support. In 2024, Suzhou experienced an upward trend in inbound tourists' arrivals. Visa waiver policies and the optimization of payment services have maintained the inbound market's confidence. This recovery has significantly boosted the positive expectations of guides returning to the field, as supported by tourism associations and travel agencies, actively fostering guides' optimism (Erul, Woosnam, & McIntosh, 2020). The social support was reinforced by specific inbound market recovery trends of rising passengers from Japan and South Korea, aligning with Nazli (2022) and Rojas et al. (2018) findings about guide's positive assessment of return.

H₆: Social norms (SNs) positively impact guides' attitudes (AB) towards returning to the international tourism market.

Subjective Norms (SN) directly influence Suzhou guides' Behavioral Intention (BI) to return through social support, expectation guiders, and guide associations. Major travel agencies such as CITS (China International Tourism Service) and CYTS (China Youth Travel Service) support this intention by organizing training sessions on "Suzhou Cultural Tourism Deep Dive," sharing the "Belt and Road" reception experiences with these organizations, and arranging overseas connection opportunities. These efforts collectively result in a significant boost to the intention to return (Rojas et al., 2018). The positive influence of social norms on behavioral intention, through support and pressure, becomes especially pronounced in high-uncertainty environments (Bayuk & Patrick, 2021; Tapia-Ubeda et al., 2021). Peer and guide association support from the international market tends to orient Suzhou guides toward the overseas market, especially given the intensified context of inbound recovery (Erul et al., 2020). In China's collectivist cultural context, the demonstrative impact of peers returning and positive industry development trends amplifies Suzhou guides' susceptibility to subjective norms, encouraging them to re-enter the international market (Shang et al., 2021).

H₇: Subjective norms (SN) positively influence tour guides' behavioral intention (BI) to return.

Regarding the international market. By directly strengthening their positive Attitude (AB) toward market recovery, Suzhou guides' professional identity and professional motivation will be strengthened, making their Behavioral Intention (BI) stronger. Suzhou, an eastern Chinese city with National Famous Historical and Cultural City status, is known for all its classic and exquisite Jiangnan water-town scenery, and its heritage gardens are all listed as World Heritage Sites by UNESCO (1997). As one of the leading inbound destination cities, Suzhou's guides typically possess solid language and cross-cultural experience. With the optimistic outlook towards market recovery, their return intention is quite high, a link had already been shown in Shen et al. (2009). The positive connection between attitude and behavioral intention was strongly supported. In fact, this relationship between attitude and behavioral intention was confirmed (Porrás-Bueno, 2024). The intention to return was further reinforced by positive evaluations of career development opportunities. The increasing number of Korean and Japanese tourists in Suzhou, along with the rising tourist flows from Japan and South Korea, and the observed trends over consecutive decades in other destinations, clearly confirm the link between attitude and return intention. This relationship can be explained by the preferences of international visitors (Chen et al., 2021; Meen et al., 2020).

H₈: Tour guides' attitudes (AB) toward returning to the international market directly influence their behavioral intention (BI) to return.

Strong perceived behavioral control (PBC) positively influences return intention by fostering a greater sense of self-confidence and control over necessary resources. This mechanism is particularly relevant and significant in the context of World Heritage Tourism, especially in Suzhou (Shen et al., 2009). The overwhelmed perception of the ability to cope with change in the inbound market will, of course, have the most positive impact on return intention. It includes the ability to efficiently utilize foreign languages to explain Jiangnan culture, classical gardens, and intangible heritage at a high international level (Shi, Ma, & Ann, 2023). This is combined with the ability to patiently handle the uncertainties caused by policy adjustments, health issues, changes in itinerary, and new circumstances, all of which help guides maintain stability (Baedeker et al., 2020). Guide associations' policy interpretations and training, as well as the interpretation of actual scenarios, will also give them an exaggerated sense of behavioral control, which can encourage them to act accordingly (Erul et al., 2020; Tapia-Ubeda et al., 2021).

H5: Tour guides' perceived behavioral control (PBC) concerning a successful return to the international market directly affects their behavioral intention (BI) to return.

The constructed theoretical model, illustrated in Figure 1, details the relationships posited across these nine hypotheses. It facilitates an exploration of the mechanism through which PROP-V influences behavioral intention, operating via its effects on attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control.

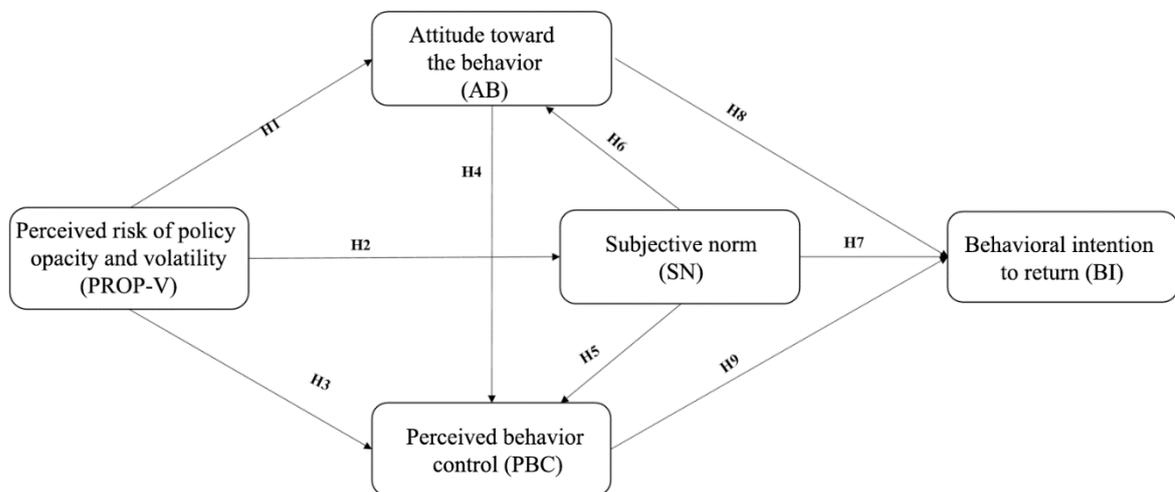


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of tour guides' return intentions to international markets.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Questionnaire Design and Scale Development

Utilizing Churchill's (1979) traditional scale formulation model, we implemented a multi-stage design procedure to ensure scientific completeness, measure reliability and ensure the validity of the survey outcomes. According to Jiang, Mohamed, and Affifudin (2024), 20 respondents were sufficient to represent the sample, as they would include various viewpoints and ensure saturation. Specifically, our initial stage design involved semi-structured interviews with managers of travel agencies, members of the Suzhou Tour Guide Association, and international guide directors within Suzhou. The qualitative analysis of the interviews followed a pattern of data saturation. Data collection and respondents were recruited accordingly. Interviews were continued until no new themes could be identified (Saunders et al., 2018).

Primary interview themes were PROP-V mechanisms and drivers of the intended return intention (Appendix A); Qualitative interviews were subsequently transformed into quantitative questions through a systematically executed mapping workflow, utilizing the specific sources listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Mapping of qualitative interview themes to quantitative measurement items.

Construct	Key Interview Findings/Themes	Representative Measurement Items	Source
AB	Although operational challenges are widely recognized, the sense of accomplishment brought by cultural communication and the high alignment with professional goals still form the dominant narrative.	"Serving international tourists matches my professional goals."	Armitage and Conner (2001)
PROP-V	Anxiety about ambiguous health code rules and sudden visa changes is prevalent. The unpredictability of entry regulations and the stability of domestic tourism create a stark contrast, which constitutes the core concern.	"Policy volatility reduces my willingness to return to the international market."	Wang et al. (2021)
SN	Explicit encouragement from industry associations and major travel agencies such as CYTS, eases the initial sense of isolation effectively and significantly enhances professional confidence.	"The general expectation of industry associations is that I should be an international tour guide."	Rojas et al. (2018)
PBC	Confidence in language ability and a sense of helplessness when dealing with external policy changes form a strong contrast. The dual opposition between internal capabilities and external controllability is a recurring theme.	"I am confident in coping with language or cultural communication challenges when serving international tourists effectively."	Heiny et al. (2019)
BI	"Conditional willingness" is a prominent feature of return intention. Preferences show a strong structural tendency toward recovering markets such as Japan and South Korea, as well as specific service models such as small group tours.	"I plan to return to serving international tourists within the next year."	Aloudat (2017)

After developing the initial questionnaire, an expert review panel was assembled in accordance with Zopiatis, Constanti, and Theocharous (2014). The panel comprised ten senior guide directors, ten management directors from travel agencies, and ten tourism academic scholars. The evaluation of content validity included assessing item-construct coverage and clarifying ambiguous phrases. Some panel members represented diverse recovery aspects, ensuring that the results would be comprehensive and reflective of all stakeholders (Chen, Hu, & King, 2018).

The procedure for Pilot Testing was carried out according to Van Teijlingen, Rennie, Hundley, and Graham (2001). We checked the face validity and readability through twenty representative respondents, who were a variety of Suzhou guides with experience in international service. Based on the feedback from guides serving Japanese, South Korean, and Anglophone destinations, we checked for ambiguity in the questionnaire, using this feedback to eliminate unclear items. We also modified the length and wording of the questionnaire in preparation for any necessary cross-cultural adaptation. To ensure accuracy, we used the native language for all instructions during this phase.

3.2. Data Collection

A representative sampling frame was constructed from the member database of the Suzhou Tour Guide Association. The population was stratified based on key characteristics: work experience, foreign language proficiency, and type of service. We opted for a stratified quota sampling approach in accordance with privacy regulations and voluntary participation limits. The quotas assigned to each stratum helped reduce selection bias and aimed to reflect the inherent composition of the Suzhou guide population. The association facilitated the coordinated distribution of email invitations. Diverse educational and professional backgrounds were included to ensure a comprehensive representation of the results.

We strengthened the validity of our results by distributing 600 questionnaires during the main survey phase. The sample consisted of three distinct groups: current guide directors working in major inbound markets (South Korea, Japan, and the United States), China Tourism Academy, 2020; individuals with career-switch experiences

following the pandemic; and others with pre-pandemic experience who were selected as potential returnees (Scantlebury, 2006).

The instrument was designed in two distinct sections. The first was constructed based on a variety of sociodemographic features and service preferences. The second section quantifies attitudes and intentions through a 5-point Likert scale. The primary distribution was in Chinese, with English, Japanese, and Korean translations supplementary. This approach caters to Suzhou guides, who are predominantly polyglots, with Chinese as their first language. The translation of all-language versions, namely, those conducted in Chinese, was guided by the recommendations found in Wild et al. (2005). For all foreign language versions, back-translation procedures ensured accuracy. A blind second translator converted the target language draft into raw Chinese. For instance, any discrepancies that occurred during this process were subsequently corrected through comparison of the versions. Expression, terminology, and cultural relevance were finally assessed by a group of linguists and statisticians. Appendix B contains the final version of the instrument.

The Declaration of Helsinki was used to ensure adherence to ethical guidelines. The specific purpose of the research and procedures for participation were clearly explained before involvement. Participants were informed about their rights and given the option to decline or withdraw at any time, with further clarification provided if any issues arose. Consent was obtained from all participants. After publication, the data was encrypted and subsequently destroyed by data encryption services. Participants were also promised a small gift as a token of appreciation for their participation.

3.3. Data Analysis

Validation of the hypotheses and verification of multivariate analyses were based on SEM with maximum likelihood estimation (Richards, King, & Yeung, 2020). Before any analysis, a comprehensive data cleaning procedure was undertaken. Questionnaires with more than 20% missing values were discarded. Those that remained underwent outlier testing and treatment. The analytical workflow is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Data analysis steps, techniques, and software.

Analysis step	Technique	Software
Data cleaning and descriptive statistics	Removal of missing values, outlier treatment, and descriptive statistics.	IBM SPSS Statistics 25
Measurement model analysis	Factor analysis, reliability analysis, validity analysis	IBM SPSS Statistics 25
Structural model analysis	Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)	IBM SPSS AMOS 24

The basic construct validity testing mechanism was confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The criteria for evaluating the validity of constructs were based on published guidelines of the industry: Bartlett’s sphericity test needed to attain statistical significance ($p < 0.05$); the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values (> 0.80 ; Kaiser (1974)). Cronbach’s Alpha score and Composite Reliability (CR values ≥ 0.70) were the requirements for test statistics regarding reliability. The establishment of convergent validity relied on higher-than-threshold values for the Average Residual Extraction (AVE) value ($0.50 < \text{Average}$). A discriminant’s integrity was also required and was conducted according to the Fornell-Larcker standard criterion. In this case, the Root of AVE should be greater than the inter-construct correlation (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Regarding data properties, the check for normality involved Skewness ($< \pm 1$) and Kurtosis (< 2), the indices. The evaluation of model fit relied on a multi-dimensional index system: $\chi^2/df < 3$ thresholds of Goodness of Fit (GFI), Normed Fit (NFI), Incremental Fit (IFI), and Comparative Fit (CFI) are 0.90. Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) were maintained at 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Afterward, the path analysis procedure of the study

tested the relationships among the hypothesized variables. The standardized path coefficient (β), along with its magnitude, direction, and significance, was evaluated using T-values and p-values to determine the impact.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Demographic Characteristics

The distribution of 600 questionnaires characterized the primary survey phase. A total of 584 questionnaires were returned. Samples were discarded if they contained values with more than 20% missing data. Consequently, 32 responses were excluded. A process of outlier detection and data treatment was performed to ensure final data quality. The final dataset comprised 552 valid questionnaires. An overall response rate of 92.0% was achieved.

Table 3 details the demographic distribution. Females accounted for 57.8% of responses. That outstripped males with 42.2%. The trend of a younger workforce is clearly evident. Guides over 40 represented only 20.1% of their respondents. Education levels were notably high, with 76.3% of respondents holding a bachelor's degree or higher. Monthly income was predominantly clustered within the \$500–\$1000 range, accounting for 43.8% of the sample. Regarding service preferences, there was a strong inclination toward small groups, with 76.1% of guides favoring teams of 2–4 persons. Additionally, a preference for serving independent travelers over group tours characterizes the return intentions of 69.4% of the sample.

Table 3. Demographic features of respondents (N=552).

Respondent's Demography	Frequencies	Percentage
Sex		
Male	233	42.2
Female	319	57.8
Age categories		
18-20	104	18.8
21-25	106	19.2
26-30	124	22.5
31-40	107	19.4
41-50	70	12.7
Above 50	41	7.4
Qualification		
Less than 12 years of education	131	23.7
Bachelor's degree / Equivalent	240	43.5
Master's degree or above	181	32.8
Income (USD/Month)		
<500	54	9.8
500-1000	242	43.8
1000-1500	144	26.1
1500-3000	80	14.5
>3000	32	5.8
Preferred service team size		
1	51	9.2
2-4	420	76.1
5-8	59	10.7
The larger, the better	22	4.0
Preferred tourist type to serve		
Group tour tourists	169	30.6
Independent travelers	383	69.4

4.2. Measurement Validity and Reliability Analysis

Data proved highly suitable for factor analysis. Significance ($p < 0.001$) characterized Bartlett's test of sphericity, while a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value of 0.892 far surpassed the established threshold (Kaiser, 1974). Skewness and kurtosis indices for all measurement items fell within acceptable limits. Internal consistency and construct

validity of the measurement instrument are detailed in Table 4. Cronbach's alpha coefficients, exceeding 0.864, comfortably surpass the 0.70 threshold recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). High internal consistency is evident. Composite Reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.866 to 0.947, while Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.6829 to 0.8161. The satisfaction of convergent validity requirements is confirmed. The consistent shape illustrated in Figure 2 provides further evidence for the stability of the measurement tool. Strong associations between measurement items and corresponding constructs appear in Table 4. Standardized factor loadings ranged from 0.818 to 0.947. These figures provide strong support for convergent validity.

Table 4. Factor loadings, reliability, and convergent validity statistics for variables and measurement items.

Variable	Measurement Item	λ	α	CR	AVE
PROP-V			0.864	0.866	0.6829
	PROP-V1: Current tourism policies in China are clear and predictable. (Reverse coded)	0.818			
	PROP-V2: Policy volatility reduces my willingness to return to the international market.	0.827			
	PROP-V3: I face more risks when serving international tourists compared to domestic tourists.	0.834			
AB			0.895	0.899	0.7481
	AB1: I have a positive attitude toward returning to the international tourism market.	0.918			
	AB2: Serving international tourists aligns with my career goals.	0.851			
	AB3: I find working with international tourists rewarding.	0.823			
SN			0.927	0.929	0.8128
	SN1: My colleagues encourage me to return to the international market.	0.929			
	SN2: Media reports positively influence my decision to serve international tourists.	0.894			
	SN3: The general expectation from key professional bodies, such as industry associations and travel agencies, is that I should be (or continue to be) an international tour guide.	0.881			
PBC			0.883	0.884	0.7181
	PBC1: I am confident that I can effectively manage any language or cultural communication challenges when serving international tourists.	0.883			
	PBC2: I feel confident in my ability to decide whether to return to the international market.	0.823			
	PBC3: I believe I have the necessary skills and resources to succeed as an international tour guide.	0.835			
BI			0.946	0.947	0.8161
	BI1: I plan to return to serving international tourists within the next year.	0.889			
	BI2: I am motivated to return to the international market due to career opportunities.	0.947			
	BI3: I intend to undertake language training to facilitate my return.	0.890			
	BI4: I prefer serving group tours over independent travelers when working with international tourists.	0.886			

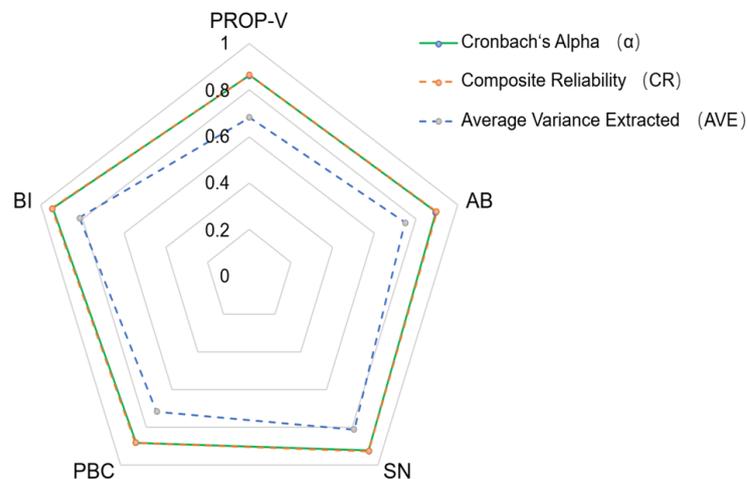


Figure 2. Reliability and convergent validity of measurement constructs.

Relationships among variables were assessed using Pearson correlation analysis. Confirmation of discriminant validity was based on comparing the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) with inter-construct correlation coefficients.

Criteria established by Fornell and Larcker (1981) were followed. Table 5 presents the results. Analysis of the extended TPB model reveals significant bivariate correlations across all variables. Coefficients range from 0.322 to 0.506 ($p < 0.01$). The bold diagonal values, which represent the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), exceed all corresponding correlation coefficients. This pattern confirms that the model possesses good discriminant validity.

Table 5. Variable correlations for the extended TPB model.

Variables	1. PROP-V	2. AB	3. SN	4. PBC	5. BI
1. PROP-V	0.827				
2. AB	0.441**	0.865			
3. SN	0.499**	0.473**	0.902		
4. PBC	0.436**	0.459**	0.506**	0.848	
5. BI	0.322**	0.431**	0.485**	0.409**	0.904

Note: Bold numbers on the diagonal represent the square root of the AVE; ** $p < 0.01$.

4.3. Structural Equation Modeling Analysis of Return Intentions

Path analysis was initiated using survey data. The study's objective was to test model parameters and fit, including the proposed hypothesis testing. The results, which enable inferences about the return intentions of Suzhou tour guides, were obtained using Maximum Likelihood estimation as the computational method for SEM analysis.

Three types of fit indices for model assessment were used here: the absolute, the parsimonious, and the relative. The data results, summarized in Table 6, illustrate an excellent fit of the extended TPB model to the collected data.

Table 6. SEM path analysis goodness-of-fit indices.

Category	Absolute Fit Indices				Parsimonious fit indices		Relative fit indices		
	χ^2 / df	GFI	SRMR	RMSEA	PNFI	PCFI	NFI	IFI	CFI
Evaluation criteria	<3	>0.9	<0.08	<0.06	>0.95	>0.95	>0.95	>0.95	>0.95
Obtained results	1.481	0.970	0.027	0.030	0.776	0.786	0.980	0.993	0.993

Results of the hypothesis testing can be found in Figure 3 and Table 7. Nine propositions that were put forward were strongly supported by the data. Path analysis quantifies the strength and direction of relationships between variables accurately. A visualization of that data can be observed in Figure 4.

PROP-V exerted its strongest negative influence on SN, with a standardized path coefficient of $\beta = -0.552$, $T = -11.303$, and a weak but significant negative impact on AB ($\beta = -0.256$, $T = -4.877$). SN had a strong positive effect on AB ($\beta = 0.363$, $T = 7.151$).

SN was the primary driving factor of variation in PBC ($\beta = 0.304$, $T = 5.221$), followed by AB ($\beta = 0.252$, $T = 5.862$). PROP-V also had a significant, albeit weaker, negative impact on PBC ($\beta = -0.214$, $T = -4.120$).

Among the direct determinants of behavioral intention (BI), subjective norms (SN) exert the dominant influence ($\beta = 0.309$, $T = 6.098$). Significant positive predictive roles are also confirmed for attitude ($\beta = 0.209$, $T = 4.257$) and perceived behavioral control (PBC) ($\beta = 0.162$, $T = 3.124$).

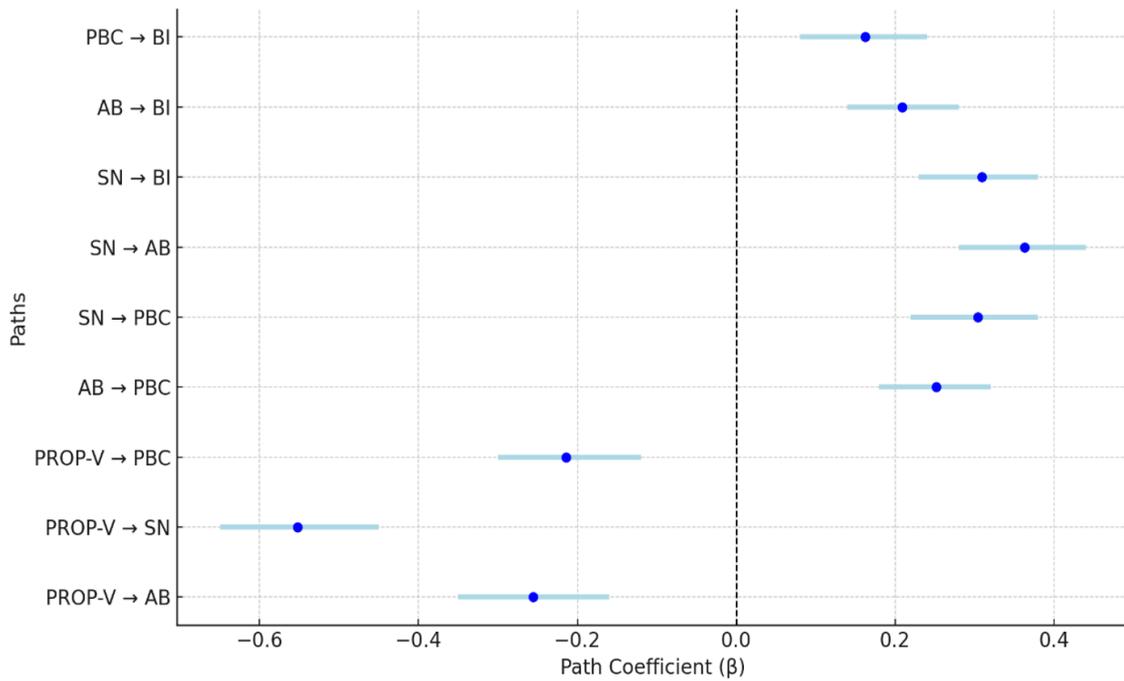


Figure 3. Path coefficients with confidence intervals.

Table 7. Results of hypothesis testing from SEM analysis.

Hypothesized path	Path coefficient (β)	T-value	Result
H1: PROP-V → AB	-0.256	-4.877***	Supported
H2: PROP-V → SN	-0.552	-11.303***	Supported
H3: PROP-V → PBC	-0.214	-4.120***	Supported
H4: AB → PBC	0.252	5.862***	Supported
H5: SN → PBC	0.304	5.221***	Supported
H6: SN → AB	0.363	7.151***	Supported
H7: SN → BI	0.309	6.098***	Supported
H8: AB → BI	0.209	4.257***	Supported
H9: PBC → BI	0.162	3.124***	Supported

Note: *** p < 0.001.

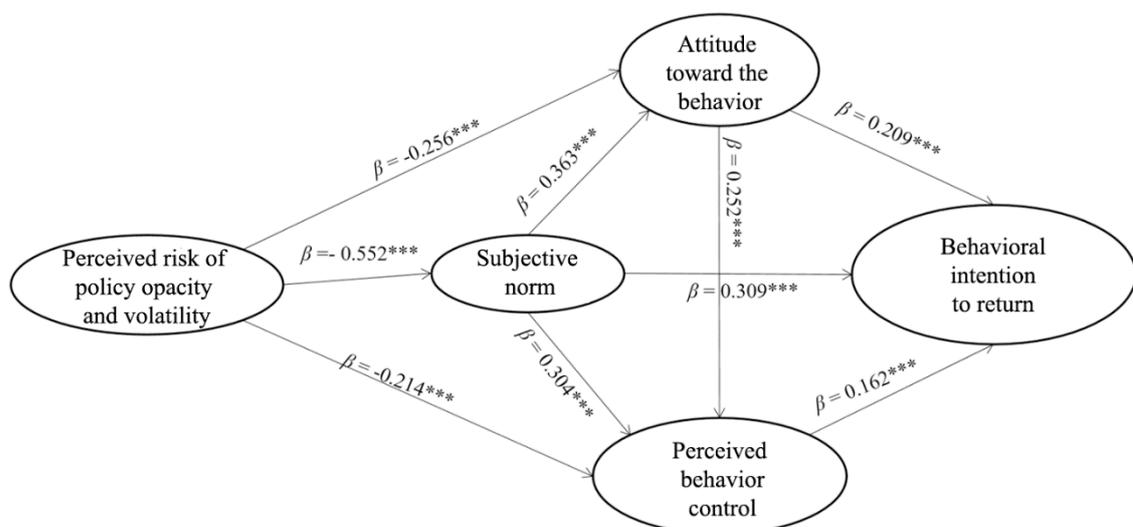


Figure 4. Results of the extended TPB model.

Note: *** indicates p < 0.001.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Discussion of Key Findings

5.1.1. The Dominant Positive Role of Subjective Norms (SN)

Overall, the SEM study confirmed that subjective norms (SNs) have a significant and positive impact on the return intentions of tour agents and guides within the international market. The path coefficient was $\beta = 0.309$, with a T-value of 6.098. This positive coefficient was larger than 4.257, which was the value for the leading determinant, Attitude (AB), as well as 5.862 for Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC). Consequently, SNs were identified as the central factor in determining return intentions. This finding aligns with the results of Han and Kim (2010). They concluded that subjective norms serve as a fundamental mechanism underlying behavioral intention, operating through both support and pressure mechanisms.

Meanwhile, the study found considerable indirect pathways of SN effects as well. SNs showed a powerful positive impact upon PBC ($\beta = 0.304$, $T = 5.221$) and upon AB ($\beta = 0.363$, $T = 7.151$). These findings reflect on the applicability of the TPB framework in managing complex decision-making patterns related to occupational behavior, as discussed by Yan et al. (2023), and align with China's collectivist cultural context, where the roles of social networks and group expectations play significant roles. This observation is in accordance with previous studies revolving around Chinese tourism professionals, including Hu et al. (2024) and Rahmafritria, Suryadi, Oktadiana, Putro, and Rosyidie (2021).

The view of Rahmafritria et al. (2021) on the expectations of the industry that drive career decisions is affirmed here. This study's research environment was meanwhile broadened to encapsulate the post-pandemic-era where uncertainty reigns. The assertion that SN influence is more significant in high-uncertainty environments (Baedeker et al., 2020) obtained new empirical backing in the context of Suzhou's international market recovery.

Despite some literature (e.g., Quintal, Lee, and Soutar (2010)) suggesting SN influence might be minor, this study confirms its dominant position within the Chinese cultural context. The shaping of decision priorities by cultural values explains this discrepancy (Fischer & Karl, 2022). The theory regarding cultural differences that moderate the mechanisms of behavioral intention formation is thus empirically supported (Kobbeltved & Wolff, 2009).

5.1.2. The Negative Impact of PROP-V and Its Micro-Mechanism

The perception of PROP-V exerted the most significant negative influence on SN ($\beta = -0.552$, $T = -11.303$). Increased policy risk causes guides to perceive diminished industry support or to sense lowered expectations from associations and family (Nguyen, Phuc, & Tam, 2023).

PROP-V simultaneously exerted significant negative impacts on return attitude (AB; $\beta = -0.256$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived behavioral control (PBC; $\beta = -0.214$, $p < 0.001$). The destruction of social support systems constituted the primary pathway: weakened perceptions of support from industry associations and peers eroded normative effects (Li & Huang, 2023). Self-efficacy in coping with challenges was also corroded by PROP-V (Erul et al., 2023).

Policy risk is not merely a macroeconomic concern. Direct influence on the micro-psychological level destabilizes the foundational intent to return. This finding echoes recent scholarship regarding the adverse impacts of policy uncertainty (Nguyen et al., 2023). The study uncovers, for the first time, the specific micro-pathways of influence through which PROP-V affects PBC via SN. This builds upon the previously existing literature that primarily focused on macro-market shocks, as highlighted by Donthu and Gustafsson (2020).

5.1.3. Shifts in Service Preferences and International Market Demand

Changes in Preferences Among Services and Demands of the International Market: Demographic information indicates a rising trend of younger, highly educated practitioners. Only 20.1% of practitioners are older than 40 years, while 76.3% hold a master's degree or higher. From a structural perspective, 69.4% of experts clearly indicate serving

FIT tourists, and 76.1% prefer a team size of 2–4. These preferences suggest post-pandemic trends toward personalized tourism and small teams, which are also confirmed here (Wut, Ng, Lee, & Xu, 2022).

This data pattern echoes Cao et al. (2021)'s observation about highly educated young practitioners with a preference for deep cultural markets. Although FIT tourists enjoy freedom of choice, they depend on deep cultural reading. This trend imposes higher-dimensional demands on practicing experts' linguistic abilities and cross-cultural understanding, as it shifts their role from merely managing independent tourist trips to mediating in high-level cultural interpretation.

Although group tours have been shown to overcome language barriers (Jiang & Mohamed, 2022), expert preference towards FIT and small-team structure can be explained by shifting the nature of professional roles (from "Group leader" to "Cultural translator"). Cultural interpretation capability and service flexibility have replaced itinerary management as core values.

Internationalization of the Suzhou tourism market and infrastructure improvements drove this preference shift (Jiang et al., 2024), endowing FIT tourists with stronger autonomy. Small teams of 2–4 people strike a balance between flexibility and safety, reflecting active guide adaptation to post-pandemic service models. The results align with the "small-scale tourism" trend (Jiang & Mohamed, 2022).

5.2. Theoretical Contribution and Practical Implications

5.2.1. Theoretical Contribution

The integration of PROP-V into the TPB model fills a theoretical void in guiding behavior research under high policy uncertainty contexts. Micro-mechanisms of PROP-V on individual behavior are systematically revealed, breaking the limitations of previous focus on macro-market impacts (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). The Extended TPB model analyzes the negative pathways of PROP-V on AB, SN, and PBC, clarifying the psychological mechanisms by which policy risk perception suppresses return intentions.

Applicability of the TPB model in post-pandemic high-uncertainty contexts is extended (Fischer & Karl, 2022). Explanatory power after incorporating PROP-V has been verified; scale reliability and validity have been confirmed empirically.

Research on career behavior in complex contexts receives theoretical support. SN's dominant influence on Chinese collectivist culture is further revealed, echoing theoretical considerations about the differences in cultural behavior (Fischer & Karl, 2022) and introducing newfound Evidence of TPB cultural adjustment.

5.2.2. Practical Implications

Government actions should focus on improving policy transparency and the stability of policy implementation, which are essential measures to address PROP-V's negative impacts and to alleviate the burden of compliance (Baedeker et al., 2020). Associations should provide timely policy-related information. Communication structures should ensure that adjustment prospects for significant policies, such as lockdowns for isolation, are clearly communicated in advance.

Regarding SN's dominant driving effect, social support should be strengthened to decrease the adverse effects caused by cultural factors, as indicated by C. Li and Huang (2023) and Yan et al. (2023). Professional training projects should focus on international routes, emphasizing the enhancement of risk management abilities. Expectations for travel agencies and colleagues can be solidified through structured information-sharing programs.

Policy structuring must consider the tendency toward independent travel and preferences for smaller teams. The growth of unique international tourism products should be actively promoted. Flexible models for service organization and income stabilization should be explored to alleviate financial strain. The promotion of adaptive employment portals will complement matching services in the independent travel sector.

5.3. Limitations and Future Work

Some limitations in the sampling technique and sample composition should be noted. Although the goal of stratified quota sampling was to achieve representativeness, the use of non-probability sampling methods and geolocation focus can introduce sampling bias and may overrepresent younger guides. The sample size of 552 imposes significant limitations on the statistical power, and the cross-sectional nature of the study's data restricts causal inference. This limitation is widely acknowledged in research, as noted by Yan et al. (2023). Suzhou drivers' behavior is affected by collectivist cultural norms, and the inability to use cross-cultural validation limits the policy conclusions' general applicability, as warned by Zhao et al. (2023).

Future research should adopt more representative sampling methods that cover additional cities and increase the sample size. Longitudinal designs should be introduced to test the long-term effects of policy risk perception. Cross-cultural comparisons should be strengthened to verify the applicability of the model. Variables such as emotional state, external economic fluctuations, and personal traits are suggested for inclusion to fully reveal the multi-dimensional drivers of guiding behavior.

6. CONCLUSION

The mechanism of PROP-V influencing return intentions constitutes the core of this study. Semi-structured interviews laid the foundation for scale development. Stratified quota sampling collected data from 552 Suzhou guides. An extended TPB model integrating PROP-V was constructed, and key pathways were verified via SEM analysis.

Subjective norms were confirmed as the most significant factor influencing return intention. PROP-V suppresses return intention primarily by weakening subjective norms, which in turn indirectly affects attitude behavior (AB) and perceived behavioral control (PBC). Improving policy opacity and reducing volatility are therefore key to facilitating guided returns. A new trend toward independent travel and small-group service preferences has emerged, with young, highly educated guides becoming the main force in this shift.

This research deepens the understanding of the micro-mechanisms of guide behavior under policy uncertainty. Policy provision and societal support should be maximized to alleviate PROP-V's effects. The Suzhou experience offers lessons to other Chinese cities and provides both theoretical and practical support for international tourism recovery in this post-COVID-19 era.

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Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions: Both authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Disclosure of AI Use: The author used OpenAI's ChatGPT (GPT-4) to edit and refine the wording of the Introduction and Literature Review. All outputs were thoroughly reviewed and verified by the author.

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Appendix A. Semi-Structured Interview Questions and References.

The exploration of determinants influencing Suzhou tour guides' return intentions was conducted during the initial design phase. Semi-structured interviews involved travel agency managers, members of the Suzhou Tour Guide Association, and experienced international guides. The study was grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) framework, which explicitly incorporated the Perceived Risk of Policy Opacity and Volatility (PROP-V) into the formulation of research questions.

1. Attitude toward the Behavior (AB)

- 1.1 Describe your attitude toward returning to the international tourism market as a tour guide.
- 1.2 Detail the specific factors that support or hinder your decision to resume serving international tourists.
- 1.3 Identify the factors most critical to your decision-making regarding a return to the international market.

2. Perceived Risk of Policy Opacity and Volatility (PROP-V)

- 2.1 How do you perceive current policies affecting international tourism in China (e.g., entry policies)? Do you consider these policies clear?
- 2.2 Has policy uncertainty and volatility affected your willingness to return to the international market? Provide specific examples.
- 2.3 In your opinion, what distinct risks or challenges characterize serving international tourists compared to domestic tourists?

3. Subjective Norms (SN)

- 3.1 How do colleagues, travel agencies, or the tour guide association influence your decision regarding the international market?
- 3.2 Have any industry leaders, media reports, or training programs influenced your perspective on returning?

4. Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC)

- 4.1 Do you believe you possess sufficient resources and abilities (e.g., language skills, cultural knowledge) to resume service? Specify these resources.
- 4.2 How do you perceive your autonomy in deciding whether to return to the international market?

5. Behavioral Intention (BI)

- 5.1 Do you plan to return to serving international tourists within the next year?
- 5.2 Share the primary motivations driving this plan.
- 5.3 What preparations (e.g., language training, cultural studies) are intended to facilitate your return?
- 5.4 State your preference regarding group tours versus individual travelers when serving international tourists.

References for Interview Questions: The theoretical grounding for interview questions was derived from the following sources:

Table A1. References and corresponding interview questions.

Reference	Corresponding interview questions
Armitage and Conner (2001)	1.1, 3.1, 5.1
Heiny et al. (2019)	1.3, 4.2, 5.2
Chaudhary and Islam (2025)	2.3
Chen et al. (2018)	1.2, 4.1
China Tourism News (2025)	3.2
Huang et al. (2021)	5.4
Aloudat (2017)	5.3
Wang et al. (2021)	2.1, 2.2

Appendix B. Final Questionnaire.

Data collection concerning return intentions in the international tourism market relied on a specific instrument. The questionnaire consisted of two distinct sections: demographic profile and perceptions/intentions. Participants were required to select responses as indicated below.

Section 1: Demographic Characteristics Respondents were asked to provide the following sociodemographic details.

Table B1. Demographic characteristics.

Question	Response options
1. What is your age?	<input type="checkbox"/> 18-20 years <input type="checkbox"/> 21-25 years <input type="checkbox"/> 26-30 years <input type="checkbox"/> 31-40 years <input type="checkbox"/> 41-50 years <input type="checkbox"/> Over 50 years
2. What is your gender?	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female
3. What is your highest educational qualification?	<input type="checkbox"/> High school diploma or less (or up to 12 years of education) <input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor's degree or equivalent <input type="checkbox"/> Master's degree or above
4. What is your approximate monthly income (USD)?	<input type="checkbox"/> Less than \$500 <input type="checkbox"/> \$500 - \$999 <input type="checkbox"/> \$1000 - \$1499 <input type="checkbox"/> \$1500 - \$2999 <input type="checkbox"/> \$3000 or more
5. What is your preferred service team size?	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 person <input type="checkbox"/> 2-4 people <input type="checkbox"/> 5-8 people <input type="checkbox"/> The more the better (9+ people)
6. Which type of tourist do you prefer to serve?	<input type="checkbox"/> Group tour (Packaged tour) <input type="checkbox"/> Independent travelers (FIT)

Section 2: Perceptions and Intentions. Agreement levels were indicated using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

Table B.2. Perceptions and intentions.

Construct	Item	Scale
Attitude (AB)	AB1: I have a positive attitude toward returning to the international tourism market.	1 2 3 4 5
	AB2: Serving international tourists aligns with my career goals.	1 2 3 4 5
	AB3: I find working with international tourists rewarding.	1 2 3 4 5
Perceived risk (PROP-V)	PROP-V1: Current tourism policies in China are clear and predictable.	1 2 3 4 5
	PROP-V2: Policy volatility reduces my willingness to return to the international market.	1 2 3 4 5
	PROP-V3: I face more risks when serving international tourists compared to domestic tourists.	1 2 3 4 5
Subjective norms (SN)	SN1: My colleagues encourage me to return to the international market.	1 2 3 4 5
	SN2: Media reports positively influence my decision to serve international tourists.	1 2 3 4 5
	SN3: The general expectation from key professional bodies (e.g., associations) is that I should become an international tour guide.	1 2 3 4 5
Perceived behavioral control (PBC)	PBC1: I am confident I can effectively manage language or cultural communication challenges when serving international tourists.	1 2 3 4 5
	PBC2: I feel confident in my ability to decide whether to return to the international market.	1 2 3 4 5
	PBC3: I believe I have the necessary skills and resources to succeed as an international tour guide.	1 2 3 4 5
Behavioral intention (BI)	BI1: I plan to return to serving international tourists within the next year.	1 2 3 4 5
	BI2: I am motivated to return to the international market due to career opportunities.	1 2 3 4 5
	BI3: I intend to undertake language training to facilitate my return.	1 2 3 4 5
	BI4: I prefer serving group tours to independent travelers when working with international tourists.	1 2 3 4 5

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