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First-time versus repeat tourists: A multi-destination data mining comparison of actual behavior

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ABSTRACT

Given that the intention to return is not a valid proxy, understanding tourists' actual repeat behavior is crucial. This study aims to systematically compare the actual behavior of first-time and repeat tourists across multiple destinations. This research employed a large-scale dataset of user-generated content collected through big-data mining (N = 8,059) and conducted t-tests and chi-square tests across different types of tourist destinations (N = 298). The findings indicate that first-time tourists exhibit significantly longer stays, higher per capita expenditure, and, counterintuitively, broader prior travel experience than repeat tourists. These two groups differ significantly across most categories of travel preferences. Statistically significant differences are evident in their choice of travel companions. This study provides valuable insights into the systematic comparison of first-time and repeat tourists' actual behavior across multiple destinations. Rather than relying on survey-based revisit intention as a proxy for actual tourist behavior, this study analyzes large-scale user-generated content (UGC) from 298 destinations to compare the actual behaviors of first-time and repeat tourists. It uncovers the "travel breadth–loyalty" paradox and delivers actionable resource-allocation recommendations for destination management organizations (DMOs). These findings suggest that, for DMOs, broad customer-acquisition strategies aimed at first-time tourists may yield higher returns than overinvesting in repeat-visit promotions, while repeat tourists can be targeted through companion-oriented and relationship-based products.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by examining actual tourist behaviors using large-scale UGC data covering 298 destinations. It documents the "travel breadth-loyalty paradox," alongside systematic differences in travel-companion patterns that prior work has largely overlooked.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is an interesting paradox that people leave their familiar home environment only to return to a familiar destination. Novelty-seeking theory holds that tourists are motivated by the desire for new and varied experiences (Crompton, 1979; Lee & Crompton, 1992); from this perspective, tourists who have traveled widely should be less likely to revisit a single destination because many alternatives remain available. Destination-loyalty research, by contrast, argues that place attachment and familiarity encourage repeat visits (Alegre & Juaneda, 2006; Oppermann, 1997). These two predictions pull in opposite directions. We label this tension the 'travel breadth-loyalty paradox': tourists with broad travel experience may show lower loyalty to any one destination, while frequent resistors may have narrower travel interests overall. Tourists are often encouraged to revisit destinations by destination marketing

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organizations (DMOs) (Agarwal, Pearce, Oktadiana, Bhati, & Josiassen, 2025). This common strategy is predicated on the premise that retained customers yield more substantial profits with reduced customer acquisition costs (Reichheld, 1993). As such, the issue of revisitation has received considerable attention in the tourism field (Qu, Zhou, Guo, & Yang, 2025; Vada, Filep, Moyle, Gardiner, & Tuguinay, 2023; Wu & Lai, 2025). The majority of prior studies typically rely on revisit intention to proxy for actual repeat visitation (Hu & Xu, 2021; Lim, Jasim, & Das, 2024; Salem, Aideed, Akaak, Al Isaii, & Magdy, 2024), and they assume the existence of a predictive relationship between intention and actual repeat behavior based on the theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Sheppard, Hartwick, & Warshaw, 1988) and/or the theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991). Nevertheless, little empirical evidence supports the validity of this assumption in the context of tourism. For example, McKercher, Shoval, Ng, and Birenboim (2012) reported that no statistically significant correlation exists between the intention to return and actual repeat visitation rates.

Given that intention to return is not a valid proxy for actual repeat visitation, focusing on the actual repeat behavior of tourists may provide more direct and actionable insights for developing targeted and effective destination marketing strategies. Furthermore, given the unique nature of tourism, including the prevalence of choice overload in destination decision-making and the considerable time gap between initial and repeat visits, comparing the behavioral patterns of first-time and repeat tourists can prove essential in revisitation studies (Li, Cheng, Kim, & Petrick, 2008). Indeed, while a plethora of studies have examined the two groups in terms of various dimensions (such as trip purpose, travel distance, length of stay, expenditure, activities, transportation mode, and post-trip evaluation) (e.g., (DiPietro, Levitt, Taylor, & Nierop, 2019; Li et al., 2008; Schofield, Coromina, Camprubi, & Kim, 2020)), their findings reveal considerable inconsistencies.

This study addresses three research questions: RQ1: What differences in core trip characteristics exist between first-time and repeat pleasure tourists? RQ2: What distinct travel preferences differentiate first-time from repeat tourists? RQ3: What differences in travel-companion composition exist between first-time and repeat pleasure tourists? Traditional single-destination questionnaire surveys cannot adequately test these questions because they are limited by small samples, recall bias, and preset response categories. To address these limitations, this study uses a large-scale user-generated-content dataset collected from a Chinese online travel agency through data mining, and applies independent-samples t-tests and chi-square tests across 298 destinations. This paper not only responds to McKercher and Tse (2012) concern regarding the validity of using "intention to return" as a proxy for actual repeat visitation but also addresses the call by Li et al. (2008), according to whom "more detailed comparisons of first-time and repeat visitors across different destination types will facilitate the generalizability of research findings". Our findings not only validate or challenge conclusions from the literature but also reveal novel insights, particularly regarding significant differences in travel companion patterns between first-time and repeat pleasure tourists.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

First-time tourists are defined as those who are experiencing a destination for the first time, whereas repeat tourists are defined as those returning after at least one prior visit (Li et al., 2008; Oppermann, 1997). While Gitelson and Crompton (1984) pioneered the comparison of first-time and repeat visitors, consistent academic engagement in this area emerged only after 2000. As summarized in Table 1, the majority of prior research typically compared tourists or visitors based on a single destination. The literature on this topic suffers from several limitations, including methodological constraints and an overly broad scope of research subjects.

First, prior research predominantly employs conventional questionnaire surveys conducted within a single destination. However, reliance on a single-case study design fails to account for cross-destination variations, thereby constraining the external validity of the findings.

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Table 1. Descriptive analysis of prior literature (2004–2025).

Author/Date	Destination	Respondent	Effective sample	% Of Repeaters	Method	Research issue
Anwar and Sohail (2004)	United Arab Emirates	International visitor	1200	60.00%	Interview & Questionnaire survey	Perception of festival tourism
McKercher and Wong (2004)	Hong Kong (China)	Pleasure tourist	3230	N/A	Questionnaire survey	Interactive effect between past travel experiences and destination status
Alegre and Juaneda (2006)	Balearic Islands (Spain)	British and German visitor	1729	67.40%	Interview & Questionnaire survey	Economic behavior between first-time and repeat visitors
Li, Cheng, Kim, & Petrick (2008)	States of USA	Visitor	1016	76.80%	Online questionnaire survey	Systematic comparison between first-time and repeat visitors
Correia, Oliveira, and Butler (2008)	Cape Verde	Portuguese tourist	120	41.67%	Questionnaire survey	Overall image between first-time and repeat visitors
Fuchs and Reichel (2011)	Israel	International tourist	760	42.20%	Interview & questionnaire survey	Comparison between first-time and repeat tourists to high-risk destinations
McKercher et al. (2012)	Hong Kong (China)	Visitor	363	35.81%	GPS tracking analysis	Comparison between first-time and repeat visitors
McKercher and Tse (2012)	Hong Kong (China) or New Zealand	Mixed visitor	N/A	11.4~82.8%	Questionnaire survey	Relationship between intention to revisit and revisitation rates
Chang, Chen, and Meyer (2013)	Taiwan (China)	Visitor	270	49.25%	Questionnaire survey	Travel expenses and consumption between first-time and repeat visitors
Hsu, Wang, and Huang (2014)	Shanghai (China)	Backpacker	183	27.87%	Questionnaire survey	Comparison of motivations between first-time and repeat backpackers
DiPietro, Levitt, Taylor, & Nierop (2019)	Authentic Aruban restaurants	Tourist	429	55.71%	Questionnaire survey	Authentic restaurant perception between first-time and repeat tourists
Schofield et al. (2020)	Tossa de Mar (Spain)	Visitor	1093	46.75%	Questionnaire survey	Perception of destination image between first-time and repeat visitor
Rather, Hollebeek, and Rasoolimanesh (2022)	Jammu and Kashmir (India)	Tourism customer	520	48.84%	Questionnaire survey	Customer engagement, customer experience, value co-creation, and destination revisit intent between the two groups
Lin and Wang (2023)	Liuqiu Island (China)	Tourist	522	63.30%	Questionnaire survey	The impact of travel frequency and climate change knowledge on destination consideration set
Agarwal, Pearce, Oktadiana, Bhati, & Josiassen (2025)	India	Tourist	492	N/A	Questionnaire survey	Differences in the number of visits among three layers of motives

Moreover, because a structured questionnaire is an investigator-defined instrument, it is inherently restricted to preset categories and may fail to capture emergent information unanticipated by the original design. The prevailing use of structured questionnaire surveys is also limited by memory decay over extended periods. As demonstrated by

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the big-data analysis of Liao and Xie (2022), the average interval between first-time and repeat visits among pleasure tourists is 8.13 years, which severely challenges the accuracy of retrospective self-reports.

Second, a further limitation in prior research lies in its focus on homogenized tourist populations without an adequate distinction between visitor types. As observed by McKercher et al. (2012), the visitor population is typically heterogeneous and includes pleasure, business, and visiting friends and relatives (VFR) tourists, among others. This conflation is theoretically problematic, as there are strong reasons to believe that the behavioral patterns of these categories differ significantly.

Finally, most revisitation rates (i.e., the proportion of repeat visitors in a sample) reported in prior studies exceed 50%. The remarkably high revisitation rate reported in these studies is suspect and debatable, as it may not accurately reflect the actual proportion of repeat visitors in the tourist population. In fact, this supposition is supported by some scholars who note that many people visit a place only once (Kozak, Huan, & Beaman, 2002; McKercher & Tse, 2012). Moreover, this possibility is confirmed by recent evidence.

Lee, Cui, Kim, Seo, and Chon (2021) suggested that tourists are less likely to revisit their first destination after taking photos, and a big data study by Liao and Xie (2022) estimated that only 3% of pleasure tourists are repeaters. Thus, a meta-analysis is critically needed to synthesize existing evidence while accounting for heterogeneity across destinations (Li et al., 2008). Alternatively, a new dataset to clearly distinguish between first-time and repeat tourists is needed.

Extensive research has investigated the differences between first-time and repeat tourists across key dimensions such as sociodemographic characteristics, trip characteristics, motivations, and post-trip evaluations. However, as summarized in Table 2, the findings are characterized by considerable inconsistency. First, while repeaters tend to visit friends and relatives (Gitelson & Crompton, 1984; Lau & McKercher, 2004; Li et al., 2008), first-timers are more interested in cultural heritage (Lau & McKercher, 2004) and are primarily driven by exploration and novelty (McKercher & Wong, 2004). Second, while first-timers travel longer distances (Caneen, 2003; Li et al., 2008; Tiefenbacher, Day, & Walton, 2000), closer tourists exhibit a higher actual revisit rate (Caneen, 2003). Third, while Oppermann (1997) and Hsu et al. (2014) determined that repeaters stay longer than first-timers did, Li, Cheng, Kim, and Petrick, 2008 demonstrated that first-timers tend to stay longer.

Fourth, while Alegre and Cladera (2010) and Tavares, Ivanov, and Cobanoglu (2019) reported that the travel expenditures of first-time visitors exceed those of repeat visitors, (Wang, 2004) showed that the expenditures of repeat visitors are greater than those of first-time visitors. Although Li, Cheng, Kim, and Petrick, 2008 and Chang et al. (2013) claimed that the difference in expenditure levels between first-time and repeat travelers is marginal, Lee, Jee, Funk, and Jordan (2015) observed a significant difference in consumption levels between first-timers and repeaters. Fifth, Oppermann (1997) reported that first-timers pursue a wider variety of both destinations and activities than repeaters do, whereas McKercher and Wong (2004) and Lau and McKercher (2004) showed that first-timers seek out local tours and broad exploration, while repeaters prefer shopping and gourmet experiences.

Furthermore, Li, Cheng, Kim, and Petrick (2008) reported that repeaters show a consistent preference for casino gaming, whereas first-timers are more oriented toward general sightseeing. Sixth, McKercher and Wong (2004) reported that first-timers express greater satisfaction with their Hong Kong experience than repeaters do, and Li, Cheng, Kim, and Petrick (2008) determined that repeaters are more likely to offer positive word of mouth than first-timers are. In conclusion, these limitations (i.e., single-destination designs, mixed tourist populations, and inconsistent findings) highlight the need for a multi-destination comparison focused on pleasure tourists using actual behavioral data.

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Table 2. Comparison of previous findings.

Variables	Consistent and inconsistent findings	
Purpose of the trip	• Repeaters tend to visit friends and relatives more often than first-timers (Gitelson & Crompton, 1984; Lau & McKercher, 2004; Li et al., 2008). • First-timers have greater interest in cultural heritage, whereas repeaters prioritize spending time with friends and family (Lau & McKercher, 2004).	• First-timers are primarily driven by exploration and novelty, whereas repeaters are more motivated by social interaction (McKercher & Wong, 2004).
Travel distance	• First-timers travel longer distances than repeaters (Caneen, 2003; Li et al., 2008; Tiefenbacher et al., 2000). • First-timers tend to visit more attractions (McKercher et al., 2012).	• While Japanese tourists express a higher willingness to revisit Hawaii, American tourists demonstrate a higher actual revisit rate (Caneen, 2003).
Length of stay	• Repeaters stay longer than first-timers (Oppermann, 1997). • Repeat backpackers stay longer (Hsu et al., 2014).	• First-timers stay longer than repeaters do (Li et al., 2008). • First-timers tend to stay longer, while repeaters tend toward shorter durations (McKercher et al., 2012).
Individual expenditure	• First-time visitors exceed repeat visitors in travel expenditures (Alegre & Cladera, 2010; Oppermann, 1997; Tavares et al., 2019). • The difference in expenditure levels between first-time and repeat travelers is marginal (Chang et al., 2013; Li et al., 2008).	• The expenditures of repeaters are higher than those of first-timers (Wang, 2004). • There is a significant difference in consumption levels between first-timers and repeaters (Lee et al., 2015).
Activities of interest	• First-timers pursue a wider variety of destinations and activities than repeaters do (Oppermann, 1997). • First-timers seek out local tours and broad exploration, whereas repeaters prefer shopping and gourmet experiences (Lau & McKercher, 2004; McKercher & Wong, 2004).	• Repeaters show a consistent preference for casino gaming, whereas first-timers are more oriented toward general sightseeing (Li et al., 2008). • Repeaters engage more deeply in local lifestyle experiences, whereas first-timers more frequently visit tourist attractions (Wang, 2004).
Transportation mode	• First-timers more frequently favor flying to their destinations, whereas repeaters more often opt to drive (Li et al., 2008).	• N/A
Post-trip evaluation	• First-timers express greater satisfaction with their Hong Kong experience than repeaters (McKercher & Wong, 2004).	• Repeaters are more likely to offer positive word of mouth than first-timers are (Li et al., 2008).

3. METHOD

Currently, digital footprints from UGC provide large-scale, cross-destination behavioral data that overcome the sample size and recall limitations of traditional tourism surveys. This study aims to demonstrate the unique contributions and empirical value of big data in advancing tourism behavior research. Specifically, this research adopts a novel tourist-centered perspective by focusing on pleasure tourists as a type. It employs a large-scale secondary dataset acquired from a Chinese online travel agency (OTA) through big data mining and conducts analyses across multiple destinations, thereby establishing a more robust empirical basis for understanding the behavioral patterns of these two groups.

First, given the distinct behavioral patterns observed among different types of visitors (e.g., pleasure tourists, business tourists, and VFR tourists), which may introduce sampling bias (McKercher et al., 2012), this study focuses specifically on pleasure tourists as its research subjects. Compared with other visitor segments, pleasure tourists tend to be more susceptible to destination marketing efforts. Second, to account for the heterogeneity across destinations, which may exhibit varying revisit rates, multiple destinations are selected as research cases. Significant differences in revisit rates are evident among different types of tourist destinations, constituting another potential source of

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sampling bias. For example, compared with other destination types, theme parks typically demonstrate higher revisit rates. Third, instead of traditional questionnaire surveys, this research employs a large-scale user-generated content (UGC) dataset collected via big data mining from a Chinese online travel agency (OTA). Finally, the data analysis involves t-tests and chi-square tests.

4. DATA MINING

The dataset used in this study was collected through Python-based data mining from the Ctrip community (https://you.ctrip.com/travels), a leading OTA in China with 796,985 accessible travelogues. As a form of UGC, a travelogue presents an autobiographical narrative of a journey, combining the actual trip experience with the length of stay, per capita expenditure, travel companions, etc. Notably, a key feature of these travelogues is that their titles often indicate the travelers' identities and whether the author is a repeat or first-time tourist. We acknowledge that collecting all data from Ctrip, a single Chinese online travel agency, inevitably constrains cross-cultural and cross-platform generalizability. The findings should thus be generalized with caution to other platform ecosystems, other countries, and non-posting tourists.

The data collection process began by using the Chinese keyword "revisit" to retrieve an initial set of 3,987 travelogues, from which key information (e.g., username, title, number of shared travelogues) was extracted via Python. Similarly, the keyword "visit" was used to collect 4,099 travelogues. A subsequent manual screening of the "visit" records led to the removal of 21 entries that were misclassified. Thus, the final sample for our study comprises 4,078 first-time tourists and 3,981 repeat tourists. Because some travelogues do not report expenditure, travel-preference tags, or travel-companion tags, the valid sample size differs across analyses. For each statistical test, we retain only observations with complete information on the variables involved. No missing values are imputed. The valid N for each test is reported in the text and in the corresponding table. To validate the accuracy of this keyword-based classification in distinguishing first-time tourists from repeat tourists, we randomly sampled and manually examined 200 travelogues from the "visit" and "revisit" search results. This examination confirmed that nearly all "revisit"-labeled travelogues accurately detailed return trips, whereas those labeled "visit" rarely contained revisiting narratives. We acknowledge the possibility that some users who did not explicitly use the "revisit" keyword might still have been repeat tourists; however, we have sufficient reason to believe that such cases are rare.

Second, a word frequency analysis was employed to reveal the destination distribution of first-time tourists versus repeat tourists. As shown in Table 3, first-time tourists most frequently visited Xiamen domestically and Japan internationally, whereas repeat tourists predominantly chose Hangzhou and Phuket for their domestic and international trips. In line with the analytical framework for comparing first-time and repeat tourists, independent-samples t-tests and chi-square tests were subsequently performed to examine behavioral differences across key dimensions.

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Table 3. Top 20 destinations most visited by first-timers (N=4,078) versus repeaters (N=3,981).

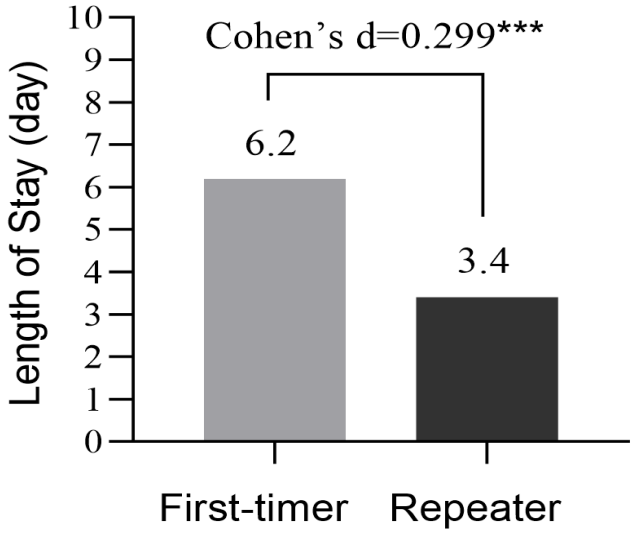
Ranking	Domestic destination	Frequency/ Percentage	International destination	Frequency/ Percentage	Domestic destination	Frequency/ Percentage	International destination	Frequency/ Percentage
1	Xiamen	174(4.27%)	Japan	73(1.79%)	Hangzhou	178(4.47%)	Phuket	41(1.03%)
2	Lijiang	135(3.31%)	Tokyo	63(1.54%)	Beijing	149(3.74%)	Bangkok	35(0.88%)
3	Sanya	128(3.14%)	Osaka	54(1.32%)	Xiamen	143(3.59%)	Japan	32(0.80%)
4	Gulangyu	91(2.23%)	Singapore	52(1.28%)	Lijiang	135(3.39%)	Singapore	28(0.70%)
5	Beijing	90(2.21%)	Kyoto	49(1.20%)	Sanya	129(3.24%)	Tokyo	27(0.68%)
6	Dali	86(2.11%)	Thailand	48(1.18%)	Shanghai	104(2.61%)	Kyoto	26(0.65%)
7	Huangshan	84(2.06%)	Phuket	48(1.18%)	Guilin	89(2.24%)	Siem Reap	26(0.65%)
8	Chengdu	84(2.06%)	Bangkok	46(1.13%)	Suzhou	89(2.24%)	Chiang Mai	20(0.50%)
9	Zhangjiajie	83(2.04%)	United States	44(1.08%)	Yangshuo	73(1.83%)	Thailand	19(0.48%)
10	Shanghai	80(1.96%)	San Francisco	40(0.98%)	Nanjing	73(1.83%)	Osaka	18(0.45%)
11	Xi'an	74(1.81%)	Los Angeles	38(0.93%)	Xi'an	71(1.78%)	Bali	15(0.38%)
12	Shangri-La	68(1.67%)	New Zealand	34(0.83%)	Hong Kong	67(1.68%)	Sri Lanka	15(0.38%)
13	Guilin	68(1.67%)	Germany	34(0.83%)	Chengdu	66(1.66%)	Paris	15(0.38%)
14	Dunhuang	65(1.59%)	Paris	34(0.83%)	Guangzhou	64(1.61%)	Sabah	15(0.38%)
15	Suzhou	64(1.57%)	Bali	34(0.83%)	Jiuzhaigou	60(1.51%)	United Kingdom	14(0.35%)
16	Hong Kong	63 (1.54%)	France	32(0.78%)	Dali	54(1.36%)	Seoul	13(0.33%)
17	Kunming	63(1.54%)	Prague	31(0.76%)	Huangshan	49(1.23%)	Rome	13(0.33%)
18	Hangzhou	62(1.52%)	Melbourne	30(0.74%)	Gulangyu	46(1.16%)	Italy	13(0.33%)
19	Yangshuo	52 (1.28%)	Maldives	30(0.74%)	Shangri-La	44(1.11%)	Sydney	12(0.30%)
20	Lugu Lake	52(1.28%)	Sydney	29(0.71%)	Chongqing	41 (1.03%)	United States	12(0.30%)

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5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Length of Stay

As shown in Figure 1, the independent-samples *t* test revealed that first-time tourists ($M_{first\text{-}timer} = 6.2$, SD = 4.8) stay significantly longer than repeat tourists do ($M_{repeater} = 3.4$, SD = 4.1, $t(6885) = 25.974$, $p < 0.001$), with an effect size of Cohen's d = 0.299. Although this difference is statistically significant, Cohen's d = 0.299 indicates a small-to-medium effect (Cohen, 1988). The actual gap in length of stay between the two groups, while detectable, should not be overstated. These results support the conclusions of Li, Cheng, Kim, and Petrick (2008) but diverge from the earlier findings of Oppermann (1997). First, first-time tourists are more inclined to explore and seek novelty and cover a wider geographic range of activities; thus, they require longer stays at the destination. Second, repeat tourists' familiarity with the destination decreases their exploratory enthusiasm. Consequently, in their visits, they primarily aim to experience secondary, previously unseen attractions. Third, these findings contrast with the empirical results of Hsu et al. (2014), who observed longer stays among revisiting backpackers. It is possible that the behavioral patterns of backpackers, who constitute a specialized tourist segment, differ significantly from those of general tourists in the present study.



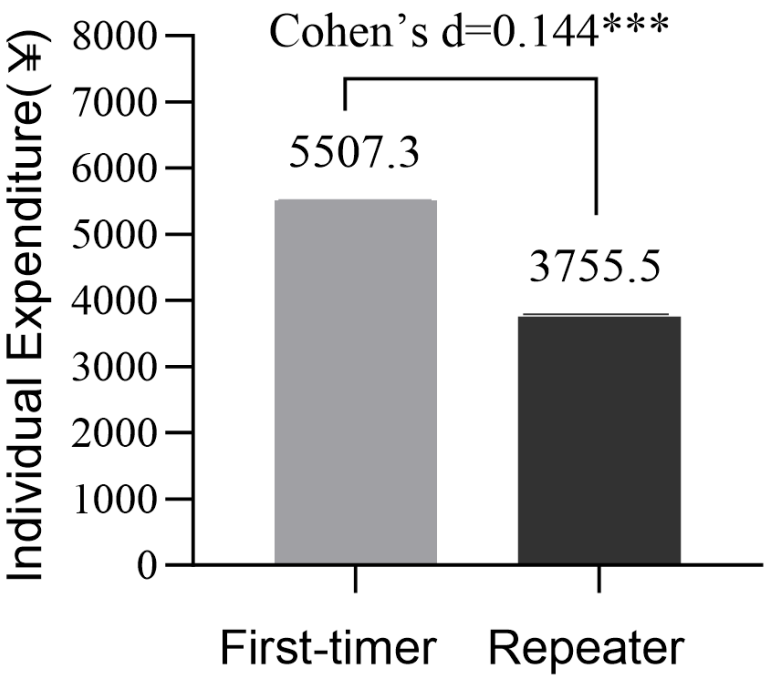
Note: ***p<0.001.

Figure 1. Comparison of length of stay between first-time and repeat tourists.

5.2. Individual Expenditure

As shown in Figure 2, the results of the independent-samples *t* test revealed that the individual expenditure of first-time tourists ($M_{first\text{-}timer} = 5507.3$, SD=6178.1) was significantly greater than that of repeat tourists ($M_{repeater} = 3755.5$, SD=4884.9, t (4074) =9.313, $p<0.001$), with an effect size of Cohen's d = 0.144. Cohen's d = 0.144 indicates a small effect (Cohen, 1988). The difference in per-capita expenditure is statistically significant but modest in practical terms. These findings corroborate those of Tavares et al. (2019) but contrast with those of Wang (2004) and Li, Cheng, Kim, and Petrick (2008), who reported that per capita consumption is largely similar across first-time and repeat visitors. While the novelty of unusual environments can trigger impulsive consumption among first-time tourists, repeat tourists conversely exhibit more restrained spending. This pattern is partly the result of their familiarity with the destination, which enables them to make informed consumption choices (Alegre & Cladera, 2010). The expenditure of repeat tourists is also constrained by a lower average income and, for many, closer proximity to the destination, both of which reduce financial outlays (Moniz, 2012).

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Note: ***p<0.001.

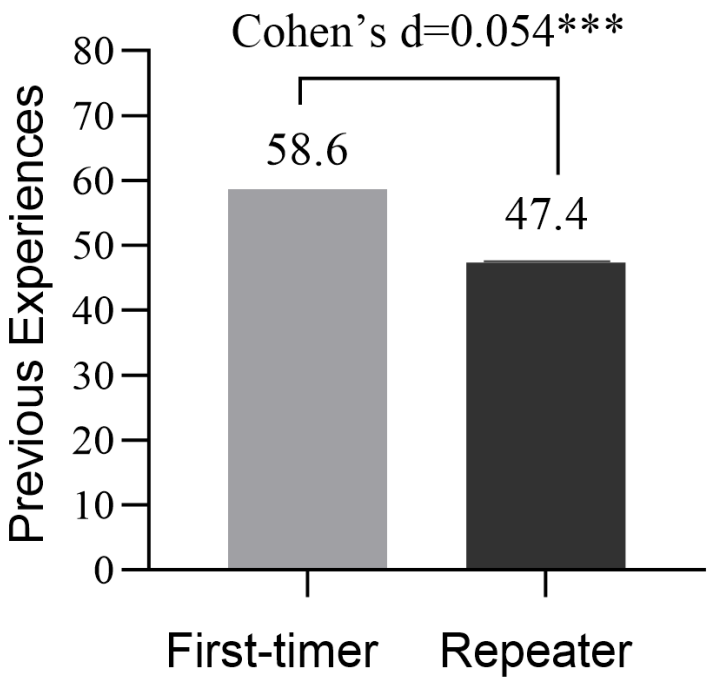
Figure 2. Comparison of individual expenditure between first-time and repeat tourists.

5.3. Previous Experience

We conceptualize previous travel experience as a tourist's cumulative number of journeys and operationalize a user's previous travel experience by the number of travelogues that he or she has uploaded on the OTA platform, treating this metric as a direct reflection of the user's travel frequency and, by extension, his or her experience. We operationalize users' previous travel experience using the number of travelogues each user has uploaded on the OTA platform. We acknowledge that the number of travelogues reflects users' platform-posting behavior rather than perfectly measuring actual travel experience.

As shown in Figure 3, the independent-samples t test revealed that first-time tourists ($M_{\text{first-timer}}$ =58.6, SD=101.9) had significantly greater previous experience than repeat tourists did (M_{repeater} =47.4, SD=104.6, $t(7625)$ =4.724, p<0.001), with an effect size of Cohen's d = 0.054. Cohen's d = 0.054 indicates a very small effect (Cohen, 1988). Despite statistical significance, the difference in prior travel experience between the two groups is minimal in practical terms. Previous studies have indicated that, compared with repeat travelers, first-time tourists are typically younger (Gitelson & Crompton, 1984; Kastenholz, Eusébio, & Carneiro, 2013) and more likely to be single. These demographic characteristics suggest that first-time tourists have more discretionary time and energy for travel. Additionally, as repeat tourists often reside closer to the destination (Moniz, 2012) and engage in more local or nearby trips that can substitute for long-distance travel, they consequently exhibit a higher travel frequency than first-time travelers. This study provides an important supplement to the tourist behavior literature by showing that first-time tourists have more travel experience than repeat travelers, indicating that prior experience does not necessarily increase revisit propensity. This result aligns with the novelty-seeking motive in tourism (Crompton, 1979; Lee & Crompton, 1992), where tourists favor new experiences over revisits because of the nearly infinite number of destination choices available, thereby avoiding repetitive travel.

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Note: ***p<0.001.

Figure 3. Comparison of previous experiences between first-time and repeat tourists.

5.4. Travel Preference

Travel preference refers to tourists' specific behavioral patterns. In this study, it was operationalized by extracting "types of playing" tags from online travelogues. The analysis was conducted in two main steps. First, the 15 travel preference tags were clustered into five categories: (1) types of tours, (2) activities of interest, (3) travel timing preference, (4) transportation mode, and (5) expenditure mode (Table 4). Second, a chi-square test was performed to examine systematic differences in these categorical preferences between first-time and repeat tourists.

First, significant differences in travel patterns between first-time and repeat tourists were observed. Specifically, independent travel was more prevalent among first-time tourists (77.4%) than among repeat tourists (54.4%; χ^2 (1) = 283.652, $p < 0.001$), whereas semi-independent travel was less prevalent among first-time tourists (1.5%) than among repeat tourists (4.9%; χ^2 (1) = 51.396, $p < 0.001$). However, no significant differences for group tours ($p = 0.232$) or weekend tours ($p = 0.179$) were found. Second, there is no significant difference in the proportion of first-time tourists and repeat tourists who prefer weekend travel ($p = 0.179$). Third, a significant difference in transportation patterns between first-time and repeat tourists was observed. Specifically, first-time tourists were significantly more likely to travel by self-driving (28.1% vs. 21.1%; χ^2 (1) = 29.105, $p < 0.001$) and by train (11.1% vs. 6.5%; χ^2 (1) = 2.767, $p < 0.001$), whereas no significant differences were observed with respect to cycling ($p = 0.632$) or hiking ($p = 0.126$). Our results contradict (Li et al., 2008) findings that first-time tourists prefer flying and that repeat tourists prefer self-driving. One plausible explanation is that in China, self-driving is a mode of travel that is largely accessible to middle- to high-income groups. Given that repeat travelers generally have lower income levels than first-time travelers do (Moniz, 2012), the former group consequently shows a greater proportion of self-driving.

Fourth, first-time tourists were significantly more likely to prefer luxury travel than repeat tourists were (3.8% vs. 1.5%; χ^2 (1) = 21.232, $p < 0.001$). On the other hand, first-time tourists were significantly more likely than repeat tourists to prefer budget travel (15.0% vs. 9.2%; χ^2 (1) = 34.261, $p < 0.001$) and cost-saving travel (23.9% vs. 14.0%; χ^2 (1) = 68.149, $p < 0.001$). Our findings appear to contradict the conclusion that first-time tourists "explore" while repeat tourists "consume". Three factors may explain this discrepancy. First, the unfamiliar environment may trigger more extravagant spending among first-time tourists. Second, repeat tourists' destination knowledge enables more informed and rational consumption choices (Alegre & Cladera, 2010). Third, income disparities, with repeat tourists

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generally earning less (Moniz, 2012), further shape these patterns. Additionally, first-time travelers show notable consumption heterogeneity and are overrepresented in both the luxury and budget/cost-saving travel segments. Fifth, compared to repeat tourists, many more first-time tourists show interests in photography (67.6% vs. 45.0%; χ^2 (1) = 241.161, $p < 0.001$), shopping (12.2% vs. 4.5%; χ^2 (1) = 77.790, $p < 0.001$), bourgeois-style experiences (29.3% vs. 16.3%; χ^2 (1) = 102.822, $p < 0.001$), and humanistic/cultural attractions (44.8% vs. 31.9%; χ^2 (1) = 77.958, $p < 0.001$). These findings demonstrate that first-time tourists engage in a wider range of activities than repeat tourists do.

Table 4. Comparison of travel preferences between first-time and repeat tourists.

Travel preferences	Types of playing	First-timer (N=3384)	Repeater (N=1704)	Overall (%)	χ^2	p-value
Types of tour	Independent travel	77.4% (16.8) [b]	54.4% (-16.8)	69.7%	283.652	***
	Semi-independent tour	1.5% (-7.2)	4.9% (7.2)	2.7%	51.396	***
	Travel with a tour group	8.5% (1.2)	7.5% (-1.2)	8.1%	1.515	n.s.
Travel timing preference	Weekend	11.2% (-1.4)	12.5% (1.4)	11.6%	1.864	n.s.
Transportation mode	Cycling	2.5% (0.5)	2.3% (-0.5)	2.5%	0.302	n.s.
	Hiking	13.0% (1.6)	11.4% (-1.6)	12.5%	2.429	n.s.
	Self-driving	28.1% (5.4)	21.1% (-5.4)	25.7%	29.105	***
	By train	11.1% (5.3)	6.5% (-5.3)	9.6%	27.671	***
Expenditure mode	Luxury (High-Budget)	3.8% (4.6)	1.5% (-4.6)	3.0%	21.232	***
	Tight-Budget	15.0% (5.9)	9.2% (-5.9)	13.1%	34.261	***
	Economy (Cost-Effective)	23.9% (8.3)	14.0% (-8.3)	20.6%	68.149	***
Activities of interest	Photography	67.6% (15.5)	45.0% (-15.5)	60.0%	241.161	***
	Shopping	12.2% (8.8)	4.5% (-8.8)	9.6%	77.79	***
	Bourgeois-style [a]	29.3% (10.1)	16.3% (-10.1)	24.9%	102.822	***
	Visiting humanistic/Cultural attractions	44.8% (8.8)	31.9% (-8.8)	40.5%	77.958	***

Note: a. A mode of travel characterized by the pursuit of refinement, distinct aesthetics, emotional depth, and experiences tailored to the individual.
b. Numbers in parentheses are adjusted standardized residuals; ***p < 0.001, n.s. = not statistically significant.

5.5. Travel Companions

In this study, travel companions are defined as individuals accompanying a tourist during a trip and are operationalized by extracting "with whom" tags from online travelogues. These tags directly display six different combinations of travel companions: (1) with a married couple, (2) with parents, (3) with friends, (4) with children, (5) with an unmarried couple, and (6) alone. A chi-square test was conducted to investigate the similarities and differences in travel companions between first-time and repeat tourists. As shown in Table 5, significant differences were observed between first-time and repeat tourists across four travel companion types: those traveling with a married couple, those traveling with friends, those traveling with an unmarried couple, and those traveling alone. In contrast, no significant differences were observed with respect to two types: those traveling with parents and those traveling with children. Specifically, compared with repeat tourists, there was a significantly lower proportion of first-time tourists (13.8%) who traveled with a married couple (18.9%, $\chi^2 = 22.69$, $p < 0.001$), and the proportion of first-time tourists (13.7%) who traveled alone was also significantly lower than that of repeat tourists (16.6%, $\chi^2(1) = 7.585$, $p < 0.01$). Conversely, the proportion of first-time tourists (42.3%) who traveled with friends was significantly greater than that of repeat tourists (38.9%, $\chi^2(1) = 5.5211$, $p < 0.05$), and the proportion of first-time tourists (6.4%) who traveled with an unmarried couple was significantly greater than that of repeat tourists (3.3%, $\chi^2(1) = 22.69$, $p < 0.001$). However, the analysis revealed no significant differences for either traveling with parents ($p = 0.818$) or traveling with children ($p = 0.260$). Our analysis revealed three principal insights: specifically, solo tourists demonstrated a greater inclination to revisit destinations. Although first-time tourists were more likely to travel with friends, this difference was negligible. Furthermore, couples exhibited a notable preference for revisiting familiar destinations rather than exploring new destinations.

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While prior research, based on the analysis of travel purposes, has consistently shown that repeat tourists are more likely to visit relatives and friends, this study offers a complementary perspective by analyzing the characteristics of these two tourist groups based on their travel companions. As a result of their need to alleviate the stress of unfamiliar environments and navigate potential travel difficulties, tourists frequently choose to travel with companions (White & White, 2008). Both the motivation to travel together and the motivation to travel alone stimulate tourists' travel behavior. This study confirms the pattern identified by Li, Cheng, Kim, and Petrick (2008), who reported a higher proportion of single individuals among first-time travelers and a higher proportion of married individuals among repeat travelers, and it provides novel insights into travel companionship. This study indirectly confirms Gitelson and Crompton (1984) conclusion that repeat visitors are older. This age disparity can be explained by the lengthy average revisit period of 8.13 years (Liao & Xie, 2022), which aligns with common life-course patterns, such as that of couples who return to a destination years after their initial visit.

Table 5. Comparison of travel companions between first-time and repeat tourists.

Travel companions	First-timer (N=3238)	Repeater (N=1774)	Overall (%)	χ^2	p-value
Married couple	13.8% (-4.8)	18.9% (4.8)	15.6%	22.631	***
Parents	7.2% (0.2)	7.0% (-0.2)	7.1%	0.053	n.s.
Friends	42.3% (2.3)	38.9% (-2.3)	41.1%	5.521	*
Children	16.5% (1.1)	15.3% (-1.1)	16.1%	1.319	n.s.
Unmarried couple	6.4% (4.8)	3.3% (-4.8)	5.3%	22.69	***
Alone	13.7% (-2.8)	16.6% (2.8)	14.8%	7.585	**

Note: Numbers in parentheses are adjusted standardized residuals, ***p< 0.001, ** p < 0.01, and * p < 0.05.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Over the past two decades, research that has compared first-time and repeat tourists/visitors has predominantly relied on conventional questionnaire surveys and typically been confined to single-destination case studies. As mentioned previously, these studies have yielded mixed results, revealing a lack of consensus. Consequently, the persistent inconsistency in findings highlights fundamental concerns about generalizability and clearly indicates the necessity for further investigation. This study primarily focused on pleasure tourists rather than mixed visitors, used a large-scale secondary dataset instead of questionnaire surveys, and conducted analyses across multiple destinations rather than being limited to a single-destination case study. Thus, it established a more solid empirical basis for understanding the behavioral patterns of these two groups.

First, our findings demonstrate that first-time tourists consistently exhibit longer stays, higher per capita consumption, and broader travel histories than repeat tourists. This research not only validates or challenges existing consistent and/or inconsistent conclusions but also responds to Li, Cheng, Kim, and Petrick (2008) call for comparative studies of travel histories through its investigation of first-time and repeat tourists. Counterintuitively, the results of this study indicate that first-time tourists report significantly broader prior travel experience than repeat tourists do. This article contributes to the literature on traditional analytical frameworks by introducing a new dimension for systematically comparing the behaviors of first-time and repeat visitors. Our findings support what we term the "travel breadth–loyalty" trade-off paradox, revealing an inverse relationship in which passion for diverse experiences corresponds to lower destination loyalty, whereas frequent revisiting manifests narrower travel interest. Indeed, a similar paradox was previously identified by Li, Cheng, Kim, and Petrick (2008), who observed that "people leave their familiar home environment only to return to a familiar destination".

Second, the findings of this study reveal significant differences in the travel preferences of first-time and repeat tourists, particularly in their choices of transportation, spending patterns, and preferred activities. Hence, these results synthesize and extend previous work (Lau & McKercher, 2004; Li et al., 2008; Wang, 2004) by providing a more nuanced understanding of the groups' distinctive travel profiles. Furthermore, differences in travel companion composition were also observed, thus permitting further distinctions to be drawn between the behavioral profiles of

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first-time and repeat tourists. While prior research from the "purpose of trip" perspective has established that repeat visitors are more likely to travel for visiting friends and relatives (VFR) (Lau & McKercher, 2004; Li et al., 2008), this study shifts the focus to provide a novel perspective on how travel companion patterns differ between first-time and repeat tourists.

Finally, this study offers several actionable implications for DMOs. First, DMOs should allocate a substantial share of marketing resources to customer acquisition. First-time tourists tend to stay longer and spend more per capita than repeat tourists. DMOs can design multi-day sightseeing packages that bundle cultural attractions and photography-friendly routes, aligning with first-time tourists' documented preferences. Broad-reach campaigns on social media and OTA platforms are likely to be more cost-effective than narrowly targeted repeat-visit promotions. Second, for the repeat-tourist segment, DMOs should develop relationship-oriented products. Repeat tourists are more likely to travel with a spouse or as solo travelers and are less interested in first-visit-style sightseeing. Products such as 'couple retreats,' 'renew-your-vows' packages, and short-break family revisit deals can match this segment's profile. Companion-based incentives (e.g., group discounts for families or couples) can strengthen loyalty and encourage word-of-mouth diffusion. Third, DMOs should avoid a one-size-fits-all strategy. The two groups differ in transportation mode (First-time tourists favor self-driving and trains), spending style (First-time tourists are overrepresented in both luxury and budget segments), and activity interests (First-time tourists prefer photography, shopping, and cultural attractions). Segment-specific product design and messaging will be more effective than generic campaigns.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations that require caution when generalizing the findings. First, the generalizability of the findings is limited by coverage error or sampling bias, as all the data were sourced exclusively from a single Chinese OTA platform (i.e., Ctrip). This sampling approach necessarily excluded tourists who did not use Ctrip or who did not submit travelogues on it. In future research, diversified data sources will strengthen the validity and robustness of the present findings. Therefore, future research should collect new large-scale datasets to enable robust comparative analysis in this field. Second, while this study established behavioral differences between first-time and repeat tourists across multiple destinations, the inherent heterogeneity among destinations precludes the universal application of the findings. Thus, future research should examine the distinct behavioral patterns of these two groups within a specific category of destinations (e.g., national parks, theme parks, or cultural heritage sites).

Another limitation of this study lies in the availability of data; although the data were extensive in quantity and broad in scope, they lacked the depth necessary to support a thorough exploration of nuanced tourist behaviors across a limited number of key dimensions. Therefore, future studies should investigate previously unexplored dimensions to enable a systematic comparison of the behaviors of the two tourist groups. Additionally, future studies should explore the underlying determinants of tourist behavior for both first-time and repeat tourists using more detailed longitudinal data. The measurement of prior travel experience depends on the number of travelogues uploaded by users. This indicator mixes platform-sharing engagement and genuine travel experience, creating validity risks. Future research should adopt verified real-world travel-history records instead of UGC-based proxies to measure tourists' prior travel experience.

Finally, given that the intention to return is not a valid proxy for actual repeat visitation (McKercher & Tse, 2012), future studies should directly examine the actual behaviors of first-time and repeat tourists rather than relying on return intentions. The fact that the theory of reasoned action (TRA) and the theory of planned behavior (TPB) aim to delineate the key factors and psychological mechanisms governing consumer decision-making has been widely recognized. In these theoretical frameworks, "intention" functions as a mediating variable, whereas "actual behavior" is the final outcome of interest. Considering the unique nature of tourism compared with typical goods or services, future research should investigate the unique consumption patterns within the tourism context and their underlying

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mechanisms. For instance, the customer journey (Hu & Olivieri, 2021; Schau & Akaka, 2021) from revisit intention to actual behavior is notably long in tourism, which attenuates prediction accuracy. This claim was supported by Liao and Xie (2022) who reported an average time interval of up to 8.13 years between a tourist's first visit and a subsequent revisit.

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