

# The Surprise Effect in Hospitality: Exploring the Role of Social Distance and Mysterious Consumption in Accommodation Choice

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### The Surprise Effect in Hospitality: Exploring the Role of Social Distance and Mysterious Consumption in Accommodation Choice

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**The Surprise Effect in Hospitality: Exploring the Role of Social Distance and Attention Allocation in Accommodation Choice**

**Highlights:**

- Social distance shapes accommodation choices under uncertainty in hospitality contexts.
- Mysterious consumption amplifies surprise and information-seeking behavior.
- Eye-tracking reveals how surprise reallocates visual attention during choice.
- Findings inform strategic use of mystery and surprise in hospitality marketing.

**Abstract**

This research examines how social distance and how attentional allocation responses to surprise shape accommodation choice. We argue that surprise redirects attention toward the features of the offering making relational considerations more influential. Across three online experiments and one laboratory eye-tracking study, we find that consumers are more willing to choose accommodations for socially close others, and that surprise intensifies this tendency by increasing attention to the unexpected. Eye-tracking data provide convergent evidence that surprise-driven attention underlies these effects. The findings integrate social distance theory with attentional allocation to offer a cohesive framework for understanding decision-making under uncertainty in hospitality settings. We also outline managerial implications for designing surprise-based offerings that align with relational contexts.

**Keywords:** accommodation choice, attention allocation, eye-tracking, hospitality management, mystery consumption, social distance, surprise.

## 1. Introduction

Surprise has become an increasingly important element in hospitality because it captures attention, elicits emotion, and shapes the way guests process service experiences (Buechel and Li, 2023). Defined as a reaction to a gap between what is known and what is expected (Loewenstein, 1994), surprise redirects cognitive resources toward unexpected aspects of an offering (Broadbent, 2013). In hospitality settings, this attentional shift influences a wide range of outcomes, including delight, frustration, impulsive purchases, memorable experiences, satisfaction, and word-of-mouth (Kim and Mattila, 2010; Wu et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2020; Kim and Tanford, 2021). When services or accommodations contain elements that deviate from expectations, consumers allocate more effort to understanding these cues, creating a distinct psychological pathway in decision-making.

One context where surprise naturally arises is when information about an accommodation is incomplete or withheld prior to booking. Such practices—common in opaque pricing or partially revealed offerings (Lee and Jang, 2013; Yang et al., 2019)—create conditions in which consumers anticipate possible deviations from the expected experience. Although approaches of this kind have traditionally been examined for their economic or operational implications, they also generate the cognitive and emotional dynamics associated with surprise, stimulating curiosity (Ladeira et al., 2023) and encouraging deeper processing of novel features (Briñol et al., 2018). Yet, the psychological consequences of surprise become even more relevant when people make decisions not for themselves, but on behalf of others.

Many hospitality choices involve selecting accommodations for someone else, making social distance - the perceived closeness between the decision-maker and the beneficiary (Trope and Liberman, 2010) - a crucial factor. Prior work shows that social

distance shapes key hospitality behaviors, including perceptions of reviews (Hernández-Ortega, 2018), the evaluation of service quality (Li et al., 2021), and visit intentions (Wang et al., 2022). It also influences the interpretation of uncertainty: when risk or ambiguity is present, individuals allocate information differently depending on whether the choice involves close or distant others (Trope and Liberman, 2010; Wu and Lin, 2017; Van Dijk and Zeelenberg, 2007). Despite these insights, we know little about how social distance interacts with surprise-driven attention in shaping accommodation choice. This gap motivates our central question: How does social distance influence hospitality decisions when surprising elements are present, and how does attention allocation to these elements guide choice?

We propose that surprise functions as an attentional mechanism that magnifies the role of relational context in hospitality decisions. When an offering contains unexpected features, attention is drawn toward these cues, making decision-makers more sensitive to whom the choice is being made for. For close others, this heightened attention may strengthen the desire to choose an appealing or meaningful option. For distant others, the same attentional focus may amplify concerns about ambiguity or risk. Thus, instead of viewing uncertainty solely through economic or pricing mechanisms, we position it as a context in which surprise redirects attention, and social distance shapes how that attention is interpreted.

To examine these processes, we conducted three online experiments testing how social distance affects accommodation choice, followed by a laboratory study using eye-tracking to capture behavioral indicators of attentional allocation (Wedel and Pieters, 2008). Eye-movement metrics such as fixation duration, fixation counts, and gaze shifts allow us to observe how consumers process unexpected cues in hospitality stimuli and whether attention intensifies when decisions involve close versus distant others.

This research advances hospitality literature in several ways. First, we demonstrate that low social distance increases consumers' likelihood of choosing a hotel, thereby extending social distance theory into contexts characterized by uncertainty and unexpected elements. Second, rather than treating incomplete or partially revealed information as a pricing mechanism, we frame it as a context that naturally evokes surprise, allowing us to examine how consumers allocate attention when faced with unexpected cues during accommodation choice. This perspective shifts the focus from economic explanations to the psychological and relational dynamics of making decisions for close versus distant others, offering a more nuanced account of how uncertainty is interpreted in hospitality settings. Third, we apply attention allocation theory (Loewenstein, 1994; Broadbent, 2013) to show that surprise operates as a mechanism that redirects cognitive resources toward unexpected features of the offering, amplifying the influence of social proximity and increasing the symbolic importance of choosing accommodations for socially close others.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on social distance, surprise, attention allocation, and their relevance to hospitality decisions. Section 3 outlines the methodology used across the four studies. Sections 4 through 7 present the empirical findings. Section 8 discusses the theoretical and managerial implications, followed by limitations and directions for future research.

## **2. Social distance and surprise in hospitality choices**

Consumers often make different choices for themselves versus others (Won et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2021). Social distance, a fundamental form of psychological distance, captures the perceived closeness, similarity, and familiarity between individuals (Troe and Liberman, 2010; Huang et al., 2021). When social distance is low, decisions evoke greater

emotional intimacy and interpersonal similarity; when distance is high, evaluations become more detached and less relational. These dynamics have become increasingly relevant in hospitality research, where consumers regularly evaluate services and experiences not only for themselves but also on behalf of others.

Interest in social distance as a driver of hospitality behavior has grown substantially in recent decades (Aleshinloye et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022; Bai and Chang, 2023). Early work examined how social distance shapes destination image (Tasci, 2009; Yilmaz and Tasci, 2013) and how travelers draw on different information sources depending on their perceived closeness to others (Yilmaz and Tasci, 2013). Subsequent research has extended these ideas to host–guest relations (Yilmaz and Tasci, 2015), showing that social distance informs expectations of similarity, trust, and cooperation across diverse tourism environments. More recent studies highlight the role of social distance in restaurant settings (Sung et al., 2020) and in interpreting online reviews (Hernández-Ortega, 2018), reinforcing its broad relevance to consumer judgment in hospitality contexts.

Beyond these applications, social distance has been shown to affect intentions (Stamola-Ampros and Korfiatis, 2018; Wang et al., 2022), service quality perceptions (Li et al., 2021), complaint intentions (Fan et al., 2015), and attitudes toward tourists and residents (Joo et al., 2018; Thyne et al., 2022). It also helps explain cultural variation in hospitality evaluations (Fan et al., 2015; Bai and Chang, 2023), interpretations of religious tourism experiences (Nyaupane et al., 2015), emotional responses in rural tourism (Woosnam et al., 2024), and patterns of emotional solidarity between travelers and residents (Aleshinloye et al., 2020). Together, this research establishes social distance as a robust predictor of how people respond to, evaluate, and choose hospitality offerings.

Building on this foundation, the present study examines accommodation choices in situations where the offering contains unexpected or incompletely revealed elements, a

context that naturally evokes surprise and deeper cognitive engagement (Loewenstein, 1994; Briñol et al., 2018; Ladeira et al., 2023). Although such situations sometimes emerge through opaque pricing or partially disclosed room attributes (Lee and Jang, 2013; Yang et al., 2019), our focus is not on these tactics per se but on the psychological consequence they create: the possibility of encountering unexpected cues. When attention shifts toward these cues, the relational nature of the decision—choosing for close versus distant others—becomes more salient. Thus, our analysis centers on how social distance and surprise-driven attention allocation jointly shape accommodation choice, rather than treating uncertainty as a separate theoretical lens.

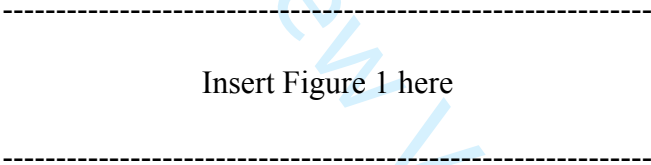
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Insert Table 1 here

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Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework guiding our research. Social distance provides the relational foundation for the decision, influencing empathy and willingness to choose a hotel room on behalf of another person. Attention allocation theory explains how surprising or unexpected elements draw cognitive resources, encouraging individuals to process information more deeply (Broadbent, 2013; Mather and Sutherland, 2011). When surprise is present, attention is redirected toward cues that may heighten the perceived significance of the choice. In contexts involving close others, this heightened attention may strengthen relational motivations; in contexts involving distant others, it may amplify uncertainty or perceived risk. Together, these mechanisms offer a unified account of how hospitality decisions unfold when unexpected features are present.

Within this framework, empathy plays a central role. Lower social distance typically enhances empathic concern (Eisenberg and Miller, 1987; Gillani et al., 2021; Lee and Li, 2023), increasing the desire to make choices that benefit or please the other person. Surprise-driven attentional focus further accentuates this process by making the decision feel more consequential. When individuals attend more closely to the unexpected aspects of an offering, they become more aware of how their choice reflects care or consideration for the beneficiary. By embedding empathy into this integrated structure, we move beyond viewing social distance and surprise as isolated constructs and instead show how they converge in hospitality decision-making. Taken together, the integration of social distance theory and attention allocation provides a cohesive lens through which to understand the effects of relational closeness and unexpected cues on accommodation choice.



2.1 Social distance and the likelihood of accommodation choice

Social distance shapes consumers’ judgments and behaviors when choosing for themselves versus others (Trope and Liberman, 2010; Huang et al., 2021). Choices for close others such as friends or family (Won et al., 2018) involve greater perceived similarity, intimacy, and interpersonal connection, while choices for distant acquaintances, out-groups, or strangers (Birrell, 1989; Elias et al., 2011) involve less emotional engagement. Low social distance is associated with interpersonal similarity and increased trust (Lin and Xu, 2017; Elias et al., 2011), whereas high social distance often evokes detachment and even discomfort

(Frechette et al., 2020). These dynamics influence attitudes and intentions across consumption contexts (Ramadan et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2021), including hospitality evaluations (Stamolampros and Korfiatis, 2018). Consistent with this literature, we expect that accommodation choices will be shaped by perceived closeness to the beneficiary.

**H1. Guests asked to choose accommodation for socially close others (e.g., close friends) will show a higher likelihood of selecting a hotel room compared to when choosing for socially distant others (e.g., distant acquaintances).**

## 2.2 Surprise and choices for self vs. others

In hospitality contexts, consumers sometimes make choices without knowing all attributes in advance, or they encounter unexpected details along the way. Such situations create openings for surprise, which directs attention toward novel or ambiguous features (Loewenstein, 1994; Briñol et al., 2018). Prior research shows that uncertainty can stimulate curiosity (Van Dijk and Zeelenberg, 2007; Ladeira et al., 2023) and encourage deeper information processing, sometimes increasing the perceived enjoyment or meaningfulness of the experience (Bar-Anan et al., 2009; Chen and Yuan, 2014).

The influence of these surprising elements may depend on social distance. When choosing for close others, greater familiarity and emotional connection encourage individuals to invest more attention in evaluating unexpected cues. For distant others, the same cues may heighten perceptions of ambiguity or risk (Wu and Lin, 2017; Chandran and Menon, 2004). Thus, the effect of surprising elements is not uniform; it interacts with relational context to shift how consumers evaluate offerings.

**H2. When unexpected elements are present in an accommodation offering, the likelihood of choosing it will be higher for socially close others than for socially distant others.**

2.3 Surprise and attention allocation

Surprise is a distinctive emotional and cognitive response that shapes how consumers interpret and evaluate hospitality experiences (Carter and Gilovich, 2010; Ladeira et al., 2023). It arises when reality differs from expectations (Loewenstein, 1994), prompting people to seek additional information to reduce the discrepancy (Menon and Soman, 2002). According to attention allocation theory, unexpected cues capture cognitive resources and redirect focus toward features that require further interpretation (Broadbent, 2013; Mather and Sutherland, 2011). This intensification of attention can heighten engagement with the choice and increase the perceived weight of the decision.

In hospitality contexts, surprising elements such as unexpected amenities, ambiguous room attributes, or novel visual cues may draw decision-makers into deeper processing of the offering. Because this attentional shift can amplify relational motivations for close others—and amplify caution for distant others—we expect surprise to strengthen the effect of social distance on accommodation choice.

**H3. The presence of surprising elements in accommodation options will intensify the positive effect of low social distance on the likelihood of choosing a hotel room.**

2.3 The mediation of empathy

Empathy reflects both perspective-taking and emotional resonance with another person (Eisenberg and Miller, 1987). In consumption settings, empathy encourages individuals to consider the needs and feelings of others, shaping decisions that emphasize care, responsibility, and relational harmony (Lee, 2016; Costello and Reczek, 2020). Because empathy draws attention toward the beneficiary's experience, it becomes an important mechanism when consumers choose on behalf of someone else, particularly in hospitality contexts where comfort and experiential quality are central.

Social distance strongly influences empathic concern, since when people perceive others as close, they experience greater similarity, emotional connection, and perspective-taking (Gillani et al., 2021; Lee and Li, 2023). This closeness increases the motivation to select options that will create positive outcomes for the other person. In contrast, when social distance is high, empathy weakens and decisions become more instrumental or detached, reducing the likelihood of choosing options that require additional cognitive or emotional investment.

Within our framework, empathy translates the relational meaning of social distance into concrete accommodation choices. When surprising or unexpected elements are present, attention allocation processes further elevate the psychological weight of the decision. Surprise draws cognitive resources to these cues (Broadbent, 2013; Mather and Sutherland, 2011), making individuals more sensitive to how their choices reflect concern for close others. As a result, empathy becomes a key pathway through which social distance shapes willingness to choose a hotel room.

**H4. The effect of social distance on accommodation choice will be mediated by empathy, such that socially close others evoke stronger empathic concern, increasing the likelihood of selecting the hotel room.**

3. Overview of Studies

Four studies explored the effect of social distance on the likelihood of accommodation choice (H1). Study 1 demonstrates the basic effect of social distance on choosing a friend's hotel accommodation in three locations (countryside, city, or beach). Study 2 demonstrates the effect of social distance (low *versus* high) on others across two images. Study 3 demonstrates the effect of mystery consumption (H2) and surprise (H3) on the relationship between social distance and the likelihood of accommodation choice. Finally, Study 4 tests the mediating role of empathy (H4), showing that lower perceived social distance increases empathy, which in turn enhances the likelihood of accommodation choice.

4. Study 1 - Social Distance Across Locations

This study aimed to test our basic hypothesis that perceived social distance is inversely proportional to the likelihood of accommodation; in other words, the further away an individual is, the lower the likelihood of accommodation. In this study, social distance was manipulated through sentences that aimed to indicate how close or far away a friend was). Soon after, participants were asked to indicate the likelihood of choosing a hotel accommodation for this friend. We use online experiments through Qualtrics Software to collect the data.

4.1 Participants

Sixty-two participants (20 females and 42 males, university students with an average age of 27.5 took part in this online experiment conducted at a major university in India. A post-hoc power analysis demonstrated that the study was adequately powered. The effect size between socially close and socially distant conditions was considerable (Cohen's  $d = 1.06$ ), yielding a statistical power of 0.98 ( $\alpha = .05$ , two-tailed). This indicates that the experiment had a very high probability of detecting the observed differences, thus reinforcing the robustness of the findings.

#### 4.2 Procedure and Stimuli

The procedures were adapted from Laran (2010); and Bryksina (2020). Participants were told they would complete a task of choosing hotel accommodation for a friend in three different locations (in the countryside, in a big city, or on the beach). Participants were randomly assigned to two scenarios: low *versus* high social distance. In the low social distance scenario, participants read, "*Imagine you want to book a hotel room and one of your close friends (like a close friend you have in your daily life) asked you to select a room for him/her*". In the high social distance scenario, participants read the following sentence: "*Imagine you want to book a hotel room and one of your distant friends (like a childhood friend you haven't seen in a long time) asked you to select a room for him/ her*".

Next, participants were asked to answer three items adapted from Darling and Arnold (1988) and Wood and Darling (1993) on a scale from 1 (disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) that assessed the likelihood of accommodation choice (*I would book this accommodation; I would feel good if I booked this accommodation; and I like the idea of booking this accommodation;  $\alpha = .811$* ).

As a manipulation check for social distance, participants answered the following questions: “*This person is probably a lot like me*”; “*This person probably holds beliefs that are like my own*”; and “*This person probably has attitudes that are similar to my own*” ( $\alpha = .850$ ) with a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree) adapted from Taylor *et al.* (2010). At the end of the questionnaire, they rated their elaboration (Adapted from Zheng and Zhang, 2023) and concentration (Adapted from Ghani and Deshpande, 1994). We used three items to assess elaboration (“*I can imagine living in this situation*”; “*These questions made me fantasize about having the opportunity to rent a hotel room*”; and “*It’s easy for me to imagine what these situations are*”;  $\alpha = .913$ ) and four items to capture concentration (“*I was deeply engrossed in the activity*”; “*I was absorbed intensely in the activity*”; “*I concentrated fully on activity*”; and “*My attention was focused on the activity*”;  $\alpha = .836$ ).

#### 4.3 Results

The ANOVA results for the social distance manipulation indicate a significant difference ( $F(1;60) = 8.267, p < .01$ ) between the low ( $M = 5.32; SD = 2.05$ ) and high social distance conditions ( $M = 4.01; SD = 1.51$ ). Therefore, our manipulation was successful.

An ANOVA test was conducted to examine whether the participant’s elaboration and concentration would interfere with the results. There were no significant differences between low and high social distance conditions for elaboration ( $M_{Low} = 5.03; SD_{Low} = 1.81; M_{High} = 5.09; SD_{High} = 1.39; F(1;60) = .021, p = .885$ ) or concentration ( $M_{Low} = 5.13; SD_{Low} = 1.61; M_{High} = 5.34; SD_{High} = 1.24; F(1;60) = .306, p = .581$ ). Furthermore, we found no significant evidence for the type of accommodation influencing accommodation choices ( $M$

*Countryside* = 4; *SD Countryside* = 1.76; *M Big city* = 4.98; *SD Big city* = 1.09; *M Beach* = 4.49; *SD Beach* = 1.14;  $F(2;59) = 1.828, p = .171$ ).

To test H1, we examined the likelihood of accommodation choice across the low and high social distance conditions. The results demonstrate a significant difference indicating that the likelihood of accommodation choice is greater for low ( $M_{Low} = 5.21$ ;  $SD_{Low} = 1.26$ ) than for high social distance ( $M_{High} = 3.82$ ;  $SD_{High} = 1.35$ ;  $F(1;60) = 17.31, p < .01$ ). These results are congruent with H1.

## 5. Study 2 - Social Distance Across Images

Study 2 examined another way of manipulating social distance. Using two images, we positioned a friend according to a low versus a high social distance. Soon after, participants were asked to indicate the likelihood of choosing a hotel accommodation for this friend. Again, online experiments through Qualtrics Software were used to collect the data.

### 5.1 Participants

Seventy-nine participants (20 females and 59 males, average age of 26) participated in this experiment. The sample consisted of university students from India recruited via an online platform. A post-hoc statistical power analysis indicated that the study was adequately powered. The effect size observed between low and high social distance conditions was large (Cohen's  $d = 0.88$ ), resulting in a statistical power of 0.97 ( $\alpha = .05$ , two-tailed). This suggests that the study had a very high probability of detecting meaningful differences between groups, thereby reinforcing the reliability of the findings.

5.2 Procedure and Stimuli

Participants were told they would complete a task of choosing a hotel room for a friend from their social network. In the low social distance condition, participants saw an image of a close friend (see Appendix 1a). In the high social distance scenario, participants saw an image of a faraway friend (see Appendix 1b). After viewing the images, participants were asked to answer five items that assessed social distance. These five items (*“The individual as someone in the family”*; *“The individual as a roommate/housemate”*; *“The individual as a next-door neighbor”*; *“The individual as a friend”*; and *“The individual as a co-worker”*;  $\alpha = .783$ ) was adapted from the studies of Bogardus (1925) and Lin and Xu (2017).

Next, participants responded to a social distance manipulation check ( $\alpha = .827$ ). The same items as in Study 1 were used to assess the likelihood of an accommodation choice ( $\alpha = .765$ ). Furthermore, the elaboration ( $\alpha = .932$ ) and concentration levels ( $\alpha = .856$ ) were evaluated again as controls.

5.3 Results

Figure 2 shows the means of the five items capturing social distance. In the low social distance condition, the highest means were someone in the family and a friend ( $M_{\text{Family}} = 5.92$ ;  $SD_{\text{Family}} = 1.81$ ;  $M_{\text{Roommate}} = 5.42$ ;  $SD_{\text{Roommate}} = 1.81$ ;  $M_{\text{Neighbor}} = 4.66$ ;  $SD_{\text{Neighbor}} = 1.95$ ;  $M_{\text{Friend}} = 5.61$ ;  $SD_{\text{Friend}} = 1.48$ ;  $M_{\text{Co-worker}} = 3.89$ ;  $SD_{\text{Co-worker}} = 1.94$ ;  $F(4;185) = 7.888$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In the high social distance condition, the highest average was for a co-worker ( $M_{\text{Family}} = 4.12$ ;  $SD_{\text{Family}} = 2.11$ ;  $M_{\text{Roommate}} = 3.71$ ;  $SD_{\text{Roommate}} = 1.81$ ;  $M_{\text{Neighbor}} = 3.73$ ;  $SD$

Neighbor = 1.67;  $M_{\text{Friend}} = 4.24$ ;  $SD_{\text{Friend}} = 1.71$ ;  $M_{\text{Co-worker}} = 5.21$ ;  $SD_{\text{Co-worker}} = 1.38$ ;  $F((4;185) = 4.981, p < .01)$ .

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 Insert here – Figure 2  
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The ANOVA was conducted to test whether the participants' elaboration and concentration would interfere with the results. There were no significant differences between low and high social distance for elaboration ( $M_{\text{Low}} = 4.61$ ;  $SD_{\text{Low}} = 1.95$ ;  $M_{\text{High}} = 5.21$ ;  $SD_{\text{High}} = 1.49$ ;  $F(1;77) = .242, p = .1233$ ) or concentration ( $M_{\text{Low}} = 4.92$ ;  $SD_{\text{Low}} = 1.62$ ;  $M_{\text{High}} = 5.12$ ;  $SD_{\text{High}} = 1.41$ ;  $F(1;77) = .346, p = .557$ ).

The results for accommodation choice indicate that the likelihood of accommodation choice is greater in the low social distance condition ( $M_{\text{Low}} = 5.08$ ;  $SD_{\text{Low}} = 1.57$ ) than in the high social distance condition ( $M_{\text{High}} = 3.87$ ;  $SD_{\text{High}} = 1.27$ ;  $F(1;77) = 15.268, p < .01$ ). This result provides additional support for H1.

## 6. Study 3 - Mystery consumption and Surprise

Study 3 examined the relationship between social distance and mystery consumption (H2). Furthermore, we examined whether surprise can magnify the effect (H3). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions (mystery vs. non-mystery consumption; low social distance vs. high social distance). To enhance realism, participants were exposed to one of three images (a bungalow, a leisure hotel, or a business hotel in a large city). Next, participants were asked to indicate the likelihood of choosing hotel

accommodation for a friend. The Tobii Pro X3-120 screen-based eye tracker was used to collect the data.

6.1 Participants

One hundred and eight participants (52 females and 56 males with an average age of 25) participated in this experiment. This was a 2 (low *versus* high social distance) X 2 (non-mystery consumption *versus* mystery consumption) between-subjects design. A post-hoc power analysis demonstrated that the study was adequately powered. The effect size between socially close and socially distant conditions was large (Cohen’s  $d = 0.88$ ; Hedges’  $g = 0.88$ ), with socially distant participants reporting significantly higher accommodation choice scores than those in socially close conditions. This yielded a statistical power of 0.995 ( $\alpha = .05$ , two-tailed), indicating a high probability of detecting the observed differences and reinforcing the robustness of the findings.

6.2 Procedure and Stimuli

Participants entered a laboratory and were told they would complete a task of choosing a hotel room for a friend from their social network. As in Study 1, they were randomly assigned to two scenarios: low versus high social distance.

We manipulated mystery consumption following procedures from Buechel and Li, 2023; Experiment 1c. Participants in the mystery consumption condition were told that the hotel was randomly chosen from a list of 6 hotels. Participants in the non-mystery consumption condition were asked to choose a hotel from six options. Participants saw a photo of a catalog of six hotels with three existing options: bungalow accommodation,

holiday accommodation, or work accommodation in a large city (see figure in Appendix B). No written information was given; each photo had signs indicating hotel amenities. A proxy variable was created to examine the level of surprise through the fixation counts that represented attention allocation through the areas of interest of the signs (see heat map figure in Appendix C). To check the level of surprise, we used three items (surprised, amazed, and astonished;  $\alpha = .719$ ) adapted from the consumption emotion scale (the CES) by Richins (1997).

We employed a Tobii Pro X3-120 eye tracker (120 Hz sampling rate) to capture participants' visual attention during exposure to hotel accommodation images. Participants were seated at a standardized distance of approximately 60 cm from the monitor, and a 9-point calibration procedure was conducted before each session to ensure accuracy. Data were collected under controlled laboratory conditions with stable lighting and minimized external distractions. Consistent with prior consumer research (Wedel and Pieters, 2008), fixation counts, dwell time, and first fixation duration were used as indicators of visual attention and cognitive processing. To operationalize surprise, we followed earlier work demonstrating that unexpected or novel stimuli trigger prolonged fixation and gaze shifts, reflecting cognitive disruption and heightened processing (e.g., Reisenzein et al., 2019). Eye-tracking thus provided an objective and validated measure that complemented self-reported items, strengthening methodological rigor and allowing us to examine whether surprise amplified the effect of mystery consumption on accommodation choice.

Areas of Interest (AOIs) were defined around the hotel accommodation stimuli (e.g., bungalow, leisure hotel, business hotel). Eye-tracking metrics included fixation duration and fixation count, which are well-established indicators of attentional allocation. Heightened attention to unexpected or incongruent elements was used as an objective marker of surprise. By comparing gaze behavior across conditions (mystery vs. non-mystery consumption;

socially close vs. socially distant), we were able to validate that participants not only reported but also behaviorally displayed differences in surprise and attentional engagement. This multi-method approach—combining experimental manipulations, self-reports, and eye-tracking—enhanced construct validity by triangulating evidence of surprise and accommodation choice likelihood in hospitality decision-making.

After the Tobii Pro X3-120 screen-based eye tracker captured eye movements, participants indicated to what extent they used the signs to figure out hotel amenities (1 = not at all; 9 = very much) (Buechel and Li, 2023). The level of curiosity was assessed through three items adapted from Kashdan et al. (2010) (“*I sought as much information as I can in this in the signs*”; “*I saw in the signs an opportunity to learn*”; and “*The signs offered me for experiences to understand my choice*”;  $\alpha = .741$ ).

Finally, the same items from Study 1 and 2 were used to capture the likelihood of accommodation choice ( $\alpha = .953$ ). The data encoding was generated in Tobii Studio. Finally, participants were informed about the experiment's purpose, thanked, and dismissed.

### 6.3 Results

The manipulation check of social distance was performed through similarity perceptions. The ANOVA showed a significant mean difference ( $F(1;106) = 20.5913, p < .01$ ) between the low social distance ( $M = 5.61; SD = 1.03$ ) and high social distance conditions ( $M = 4.56; SD = 1.35$ ). The manipulation check of mystery consumption was captured with surprise (Richins, 1997), curiosity (Kashdan et al., 2010), and signs to infer hotel amenities. There was significant difference in the level of surprise ( $M_{Non-mystery} = 4.27; SD_{Non-mystery} = .08; M_{Mystery} = 5.59; SD_{Mystery} = 1.37; F(1,106) = 37.6969, p < .01$ ). Likewise, the level of curiosity was significantly different ( $M_{Non-mystery} = 4.28; SD_{Non-mystery} = 1.18; M$

$Mystery = 5.69$ ;  $SD_{Mystery} = 1.01$ ;  $F(1,106) = 44.653$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Finally, signs through the number of fixations to interpret what the hotels offered was greater for mystery ( $M = 6.29$ ;  $SD = 2.06$ ) than non-mystery consumption ( $M = 7.6$ ;  $SD = 1.62$ ;  $F(1,106) = 13.0677$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Hypothesis H1, which tests the likelihood of accommodation choice between low and high social distance conditions, demonstrates a significant difference ( $M_{Low} = 5.04$ ;  $SD_{Low} = 1.4$ ;  $M_{High} = 4.46$ ;  $SD_{High} = 1.48$ ;  $F(1,106) = 4.4907$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

To test hypothesis H2, we used an ANOVA to compare the conditions of socially close versus socially distant other and mystery versus non-mystery consumption conditions. There a significant difference between low and social distance in the non-mystery consumption condition ( $M_{Low} = 4.19$ ;  $SD_{Low} = 1.13$ ;  $M_{High} = 5.01$ ;  $SD_{High} = 1.39$ ;  $F(1,56) = 5.961$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Similarly, there is a significant difference between socially close and socially distant other in the mystery consumption condition ( $M_{Low} = 5.89$ ;  $SD_{Low} = 1.09$ ;  $M_{High} = 3.71$ ;  $SD_{High} = 1.26$ ;  $F(1,48) = 43.51$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Within the socially close condition, a significant difference was observed between mystery and non-mystery consumption ( $M_{Non-mystery} = 4.19$ ;  $SD_{Non-mystery} = 1.13$ ;  $M_{Mystery} = 5.91$ ;  $SD_{Mystery} = 1.09$ ;  $F(1,54) = 32.772$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Finally, in the socially distant condition, a significant difference was observed between mystery and non-mystery consumption ( $M_{Non-mystery} = 5.01$ ;  $SD_{Non-mystery} = 1.39$ ;  $M_{Mystery} = 3.71$ ;  $SD_{Mystery} = 1.26$ ;  $F(1,50) = 12.1303$ ,  $p < .01$ ) (see Figure 3).

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Insert here – Figure 3

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It is worth noting that in Study 3, under the non-mystery condition, socially distant others were more likely to be allocated the accommodation than socially close others,

contrary to our initial prediction. While unexpected, this result suggests that in the absence of mystery, participants may rely on more instrumental allocation norms, reserving ordinary or less distinctive options for distant recipients. This finding highlights that the role of social distance in hospitality choices is context-dependent, and that the presence or absence of mystery can fundamentally alter allocation patterns.

Kruskal-Wallis's test was conducted to determine whether there is a difference in fixation count (representing attention allocation across the areas of interest of the signs) in mystery versus non-mystery consumption conditions. There was no significant difference between low and high social distance in the non-mystery consumption condition ( $M_{Low} = 16.9$ ;  $SD_{Low} = 8.29$ ;  $M_{High} = 16.1$ ;  $SD_{High} = 10.13$ ;  $H(1;58) = .5123$ ,  $p = .4741$ ). On the other hand, there is a significant difference between socially close and socially distant other in the mystery consumption condition ( $M_{Low} = 31.5$ ;  $SD_{Low} = 8.96$ ;  $M_{High} = 24.4$ ;  $SD_{High} = 9.61$ ;  $H(1,50) = 5.2288$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Within the socially close condition, a significant difference was observed between mystery and non-mystery consumption conditions ( $M_{Non-mystery} = 16.9$ ;  $SD_{Non-mystery} = 8.29$ ;  $M_{Mystery} = 31.5$ ;  $SD_{Mystery} = 8.96$ ;  $H(1,50) = 5.3186$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Finally, in the socially distant condition, a significant difference was observed between mystery and non-mystery consumption conditions ( $M_{Non-mystery} = 16.1$ ;  $SD_{Non-mystery} = 10.13$ ;  $M_{Mystery} = 24.4$ ;  $SD_{Mystery} = 9.61$ ;  $H(1,58) = 26.5281$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These results demonstrate that surprise can enhance the effects of mystery consumption, supporting H3.

## 7. Study 4 - Empathy as a Mediator

Study 4 tested whether empathy mediates the interaction effect between social distance and accommodation choice (H4). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two scenarios (socially close vs. socially distant other). In the socially close scenario, they

imagined booking accommodation for a close friend, while in the socially distant scenario, they imagined doing so for a distant acquaintance.

## 7.1 Participants

A total of ninety-three Brazilian university students (51.6% female,  $Mage = 27.63$  years,  $SD = 7.21$ ) were recruited through an online panel. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: low other versus low and high social distance. A post-hoc power analysis demonstrated that the study was adequately powered. The effect size between low and high social distance conditions was large (Cohen's  $d = 1.10$ ; Hedges'  $g = 1.09$ ), with socially distant participants reporting significantly higher choice accommodation scores than those in low social distance conditions ( $t = 5.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This yielded a statistical power of 0.999 ( $\alpha = .05$ , two-tailed), indicating a very high probability of detecting the observed differences and reinforcing the robustness of the findings.

## 7.2 Procedure and Stimuli

Participants were instructed to imagine booking a hotel room on behalf of another person. In the low social distance condition, participants read: "Imagine you want to book a hotel room and one of your close friends (like a close friend you have in your daily life) asked you to select a room for him/her." In the high social distance, they read: "Imagine you want to book a hotel room and one of your distant friends (like a childhood friend you haven't seen in a long time) asked you to select a room for him/her."

To assess empathy, participants completed a seven-point (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) scale adapted from Shuqair et al. (2021). Items included “I feel that this person is sympathetic,” “tender,” “warm,” “compassionate,” and “soft-hearted.”

The dependent variable was the likelihood of accommodation choice, measured with three items ( $\alpha = .88$ ) adapted from Darling and Arnold (1988) and Wood and Darling (1993), on a scale from 1 (disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). These items assessed participants’ willingness to choose the accommodation on behalf of the target person.

### 7.3 Results

Higher perceived social distance is negatively related to a greater likelihood of accommodation choice ( $\beta = -1.0182$ ;  $SE = .3055$ ;  $t = -3.3329$ ;  $CI [-1.6252; -.4113]$ ). This result confirms hypothesis *H1*. Consequently, the perceived social distance effect on empathy is significant ( $b = -1.1437$ ;  $SE = .2601$ ;  $t = -4.397$ ;  $CI [-1.6604; -.6271]$ ;  $R^2 = .1752$ ,  $MSE = 1.5583$ ;  $F(1; 91) = 19.3336$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, the effect of empathy on the likelihood of accommodation choice was significant ( $b = .5262$ ;  $SE = .1118$ ;  $t = 4.7063$ ;  $CI [.3041; .7484]$ ;  $R^2 = .3846$ ,  $MSE = 1.773$ ;  $F(2; 90) = 28.12$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

The indirect effect of perceived social distance via empathy was significant ( $b = -0.6019$ ;  $CI [-1.0136, -.2707]$ ), as the confidence interval does not include zero. However, this indirect effect was smaller in magnitude than the direct effect, indicating partial mediation. These findings support *H4* by demonstrating that empathy acts as a psychological mechanism that helps explain why high perceived social distance increases the likelihood of accommodation choice.

## 8. Discussion and Implications

This study examined how social distance and surprise-driven attentional processes shape consumers' accommodation choices. The findings show that such decisions are not purely economic evaluations but relational judgments that depend on how close the beneficiary is to the decision-maker. By integrating social distance theory with attention allocation, the research demonstrates that surprising elements heighten cognitive engagement, making relational considerations more influential in hospitality settings.

Our results indicate that surprise strengthens willingness to choose accommodations for socially close others. When unexpected cues are present, individuals allocate more attention to interpreting these elements, increasing the perceived significance of the decision for a close beneficiary. In contrast, when social distance is high, choices become more detached, and the positive influence of surprise is reduced. This pattern clarifies when surprising elements in hospitality offerings enhance evaluations and when they are less likely to be effective.

We measured accommodation choice using both general willingness-to-choose scales and specific evaluations of particular rooms. The consistency across these approaches confirms that the effects are not driven solely by stimulus characteristics but reflect underlying psychological processes. The inclusion of eye-tracking further strengthens this conclusion by showing that attention intensifies when surprising elements appear, providing behavioral evidence for the cognitive mechanisms proposed.

Taken together, these insights contribute to hospitality research by highlighting how relational closeness and attentional responses jointly shape decision-making under uncertainty. They also point to opportunities for managers to design surprise-based elements that align with the social context in which decisions are made.

8.1 Theoretical Implications

This research advances hospitality theory by integrating social distance with surprise-driven attention allocation to explain accommodation choice under uncertainty. While prior studies have examined situations where guests face incomplete or partially disclosed information (Bar-Anan et al., 2009; Lee & Jang, 2013; Chen & Yuan, 2014; Yang et al., 2019), these contexts have rarely been connected to the psychological mechanisms that guide decision-making. Our work reframes such situations not as a pricing phenomenon but as conditions that naturally evoke surprise, allowing us to examine how unexpected cues redirect cognitive resources and influence relational judgments.

Building on social distance research (Yilmaz & Tasci, 2013; Fan et al., 2015; Hernández-Ortega, 2018; Li et al., 2021), we show that people are more willing to choose accommodations for socially close others, consistent with prior findings on trust, perceived similarity, and positive evaluations (Stamolampros & Korfiatis, 2018; Frechette et al., 2020). Our contribution lies in demonstrating that surprise intensifies the role of social distance, revealing that relational closeness and attentional engagement jointly shape responses to hospitality offerings. Rather than treating social distance and surprise as separate constructs, the findings indicate that their interaction creates distinct decision patterns, especially when unexpected elements require additional cognitive interpretation.

Surprise also emerges as a central mechanism linking cognitive curiosity with relational motivations. When unexpected cues appear, consumers allocate more cognitive resources to understand them (Briñol et al., 2018; Ladeira et al., 2023), and this attentional focus heightens the psychological significance of choosing for close others. In this sense, surprise functions not merely as a hedonic or novel stimulus but as a relational amplifier—

making care, responsibility, and empathy more salient in decisions involving close beneficiaries.

An additional insight is that, in the absence of surprising cues, socially distant others were sometimes allocated the accommodation more frequently than socially close others. This reversal suggests that when offerings lack unexpected features, consumers may shift to instrumental or normative allocation rules, reserving less distinctive options for distant recipients. This nuance enriches prior work by showing that the relational dynamics of consumer choice depend on whether attention is drawn toward unexpected aspects of the service environment.

Finally, the findings extend attention allocation theory (Van Dijk & Zeelenberg, 2007; Broadbent, 2013; Mather & Sutherland, 2011) by demonstrating that the cognitive effort elicited by surprise is moderated by social distance. Consumers devote more processing effort when choosing for close others, where empathy and responsibility heighten the relevance of unexpected cues, compared to choices for distant others. This integrated view clarifies how relational and cognitive mechanisms jointly influence hospitality decisions, offering a cohesive theoretical account of decision-making under uncertainty.

## 8.2 Practical Implications

This study offers practical guidance for hospitality managers seeking to design experiences that reflect how social distance and surprise jointly shape consumer decision-making. By understanding how guests allocate attention to unexpected elements—and how this interacts with relational closeness—managers can tailor offerings that enhance satisfaction, reduce perceived risk, and strengthen emotional engagement.

First, marketing communications can frame surprise differently depending on whom the guest is booking for. When consumers book for close others, unexpected elements can be positioned as meaningful gestures that create shared enjoyment or positive emotional moments. In contrast, when bookings involve more distant recipients, messaging should emphasize clarity and reassurance, incorporating small, low-risk surprises that do not heighten uncertainty.

Second, service design can integrate surprise at touchpoints where it enhances, rather than complicates, decision-making. For close companions, personalized or emotionally resonant surprises—such as thoughtful amenities or small experiential upgrades—signal understanding and care. For distant others, providers should focus on controlled and predictable forms of novelty that add value without creating ambiguity.

Third, loyalty programs and CRM strategies can benefit from recognizing that surprise operates differently across relational contexts. Rewards with experiential or relational meaning may be most effective when bookings involve close others, while more functional benefits—flexibility, reliability, ease of use—may be preferred when distance is high. Aligning loyalty mechanics with booking intentions can strengthen both trust and perceived value.

Overall, these insights show that surprise is not universally beneficial in hospitality. Its impact depends on the social relationship embedded in the booking decision and on how consumers allocate attention to unexpected cues. By designing offerings and communications that fit this relational context, hospitality firms can create experiences that feel thoughtful, appropriate, and memorable across different types of guests.

8.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study has some limitations that should be addressed in future research. Our measure of social distance was restricted to a dichotomy of socially close versus socially distant others, without exploring choices made for oneself versus others. Our focus was also limited to hotel consumers. Although this provides valuable insights, examining other hospitality sectors, such as restaurants, could offer new perspectives and enhance the generalizability of our findings.

While our online experiments and lab-based eye-tracking study provide internal validity, a key limitation lies in the external validity of our findings. Hospitality is a global industry, yet our samples were drawn primarily from Indian/Brazilian university students and controlled experimental settings. As such, cultural and demographic variations may moderate how social distance, mystery consumption, and surprise shape accommodation choices. For instance, collectivist cultures may interpret social distance differently than individualist cultures, and younger versus older consumers may vary in their responsiveness to mystery or surprise. To enhance generalizability, future research should replicate these findings in cross-cultural contexts, with more heterogeneous demographic samples, and in field-based settings that reflect authentic hospitality consumption experiences. Such efforts would extend the external validity of the present work and enrich its theoretical and managerial contributions to a global hospitality context.

Additionally, manipulating social distance in Study 1b produced inconsistent results for co-workers compared to other social categories (family, friend, neighbor, and roommate). Future studies should investigate how different work contexts impact perceptions of social distance and consumer choices involving co-workers.

Finally, further research into the role of surprise in hospitality is needed. Utilizing technologies like facial recognition to measure surprise and other emotions, such as fear,

could deepen our understanding of how emotions influence consumer behavior in mystery shopping scenarios.

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**Table 1 – Recent studies on social distance on hospitality and tourism**

| Author<br>(Year)              | Study focus                                         | Purpose with social<br>distance                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Main Findings                                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Tasci (2009)                  | Destination<br>image                                | Investigate if there is a<br>relationship between<br>visual information from<br>movies and consumer-<br>behavior variables,<br>including destination<br>image, destination<br>desirability, visit<br>intention, and social<br>distance. | Visual information from<br>movies partially influences<br>destination image,<br>destination desirability,<br>visit intention, and social<br>distance. |
| Yilmaz and<br>Tasci (2013)    | Online<br>information<br>sources and<br>hospitality | Explore the relationship<br>between social distance<br>and the internet as an<br>information source.                                                                                                                                    | There is no relationship<br>between the use of the<br>internet as an information<br>source about the host<br>community and social<br>distance.        |
| Yilmaz and<br>Tasci (2015)    | Contact factors<br>and hospitality                  | Determine whether there<br>is such a relationship<br>between social distance<br>and different contact<br>factors (previous visits<br>and close friendships)                                                                             | Social distance partial<br>support effects on attitudes.                                                                                              |
| Fan <i>et al.</i><br>(2015)   | Restaurants                                         | Examine the impact of<br>social distance between<br>focal customers and other<br>customers on complaint<br>intentions in a cross-<br>cultural context.                                                                                  | Social distance moderates'<br>complaint intentions.                                                                                                   |
| Nyaupane <i>et al.</i> (2015) | Religious<br>tourism                                | Examine the role of social<br>distance in the<br>relationships between                                                                                                                                                                  | Social distance determined<br>the relational structures,<br>similarities and                                                                          |

|                                          |                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                           |
|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                          |                                                         | people of different faiths<br>visiting the sacred sites of<br>others.                                                                                                                      | dissimilarities between<br>travelers of different faiths<br>consuming the same<br>tourism spaces.                                                                         |
| Joo <i>et al.</i><br>(2018)              | Resident-tourist<br>interactions                        | Frequency of interaction<br>and different types of<br>activities that residents<br>engage in with visitors<br>partially explain both<br>emotional solidarity and<br>social distance.       | Measure the factors<br>explaining emotional<br>solidarity and social<br>distance by focusing on the<br>frequency and the nature of<br>interaction in domestic<br>tourism. |
| Hernández-<br>Ortega (2018)              | Online<br>consumer<br>reviews and<br>hotels             | Analyze whether the<br>social psychological<br>distance is the underlying<br>mechanism that mediates<br>the effect of online<br>consumer review aspects<br>on the receiver's<br>responses. | social psychological<br>distance mediates the effect<br>of online consumer review.                                                                                        |
| Stamolaampros<br>and Korfiatis<br>(2018) | Online reviews<br>and tourism                           | Examine the effects of<br>online reviews on<br>customer purchase,<br>intentions under the<br>perspective of construal<br>level theory.                                                     | Social distance has a<br>negative direct effect on<br>review valence.                                                                                                     |
| Sung <i>et al.</i><br>(2020)             | Corporate<br>social<br>responsibility<br>in restaurants | Investigate how restaurant<br>chain's CSR messages on<br>social networking sites<br>affect brand value and<br>social distance.                                                             | Social distance and brand<br>credibility enhance the<br>brand equity.                                                                                                     |
| Aleshinloye<br><i>et al.</i> (2020)      | Place<br>attachment in<br>tourism                       | Analyze place attachment<br>as an antecedent of social<br>distance, mediated by<br>emotional solidarity and<br>moderated by frequency                                                      | Place dependence is a<br>significant predictor of<br>social distance.                                                                                                     |

|                               |                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                               |                                              | of contact between<br>tourists and residents.                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| He <i>et al.</i><br>(2021)    | Perception of<br>illness and<br>tourism      | Examines the impact of<br>tourism practitioners'<br>perceptions of illness<br>labeling toward travelers,<br>social identification with<br>travelers, and effects of<br>spatial stigma          | Social distance moderates<br>the relationship between<br>illness labeling toward<br>travelers and spatial stigma.                                                                                                  |
| Li <i>et al.</i><br>(2021)    | Physical<br>attractiveness<br>in hospitality | Analyze the relationship<br>between tourism service<br>providers' physical<br>attractiveness (SPPA) and<br>tourists' perceptions of<br>social distance,<br>stereotypes and service<br>quality. | Tourism service providers'<br>physical attractiveness can<br>improve tourists' stereotype<br>perception by reducing the<br>social distance between<br>tourists.                                                    |
| Wang <i>et al.</i><br>(2022)  | Restaurant visit<br>intentions               | Explore the effects among<br>congruence type of<br>nonverbal ad messages,<br>assessment perspective of<br>verbal ad messages and<br>social distance on<br>consumers' visit<br>intention.       | Consumers who feel a close<br>social distance between<br>themselves and their<br>companions report higher<br>visit intentions when<br>exposed to internal versus<br>external perspective-<br>oriented ad messages. |
| Thyne <i>et al.</i><br>(2022) | Resident<br>attitudes<br>towards tourists    | Examined the extent to<br>which residents' attitudes<br>concerning tourism can<br>predict a sympathetic<br>understanding of tourists.                                                          | Negative attitudes<br>concerning tourism to have<br>the strongest impact on less<br>sympathetic understanding<br>of tourists.                                                                                      |
| Bai and<br>Chang (2023)       | Tourist<br>encounter<br>dynamics             | Examine whether the<br>tourists' role typology and<br>nationality could<br>moderate the relationship<br>between encounter level<br>and the resulting conflict                                  | Tourist's nationality has the<br>moderating effect on the<br>relationship between<br>encounter level and social<br>distance                                                                                        |

|                              |                                          |                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                   |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                              |                                          | or diminished social distance.                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                   |
| Woosnam <i>et al.</i> (2024) | Emotions in social encounters in tourism | Examined the role of basic and complex emotions in explaining residents' preference for both intimate and casual social encounters (i.e. social distance) with tourists. | Emotional solidarity and social distance explain residents' preference.                                           |
| Xu et al. (2025)             | Travel                                   | Examined the role of travel context (companionship vs. solo traveling) in tourists' choice of mystery (vs. non-mystery) offerings.                                       | When traveling with companions, tourists have a higher preference for mystery offerings than when traveling solo. |

**Figure 1:** Conceptual model diagram

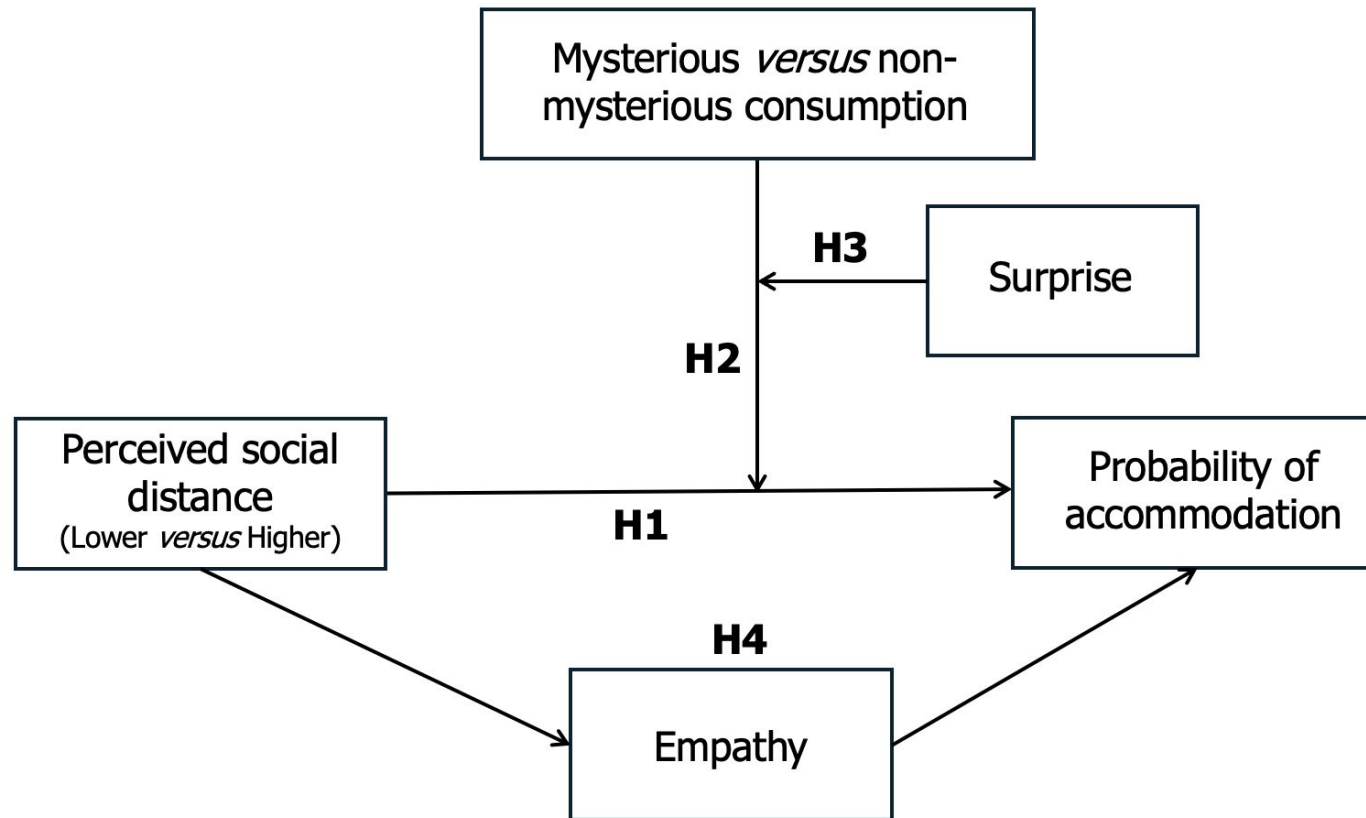
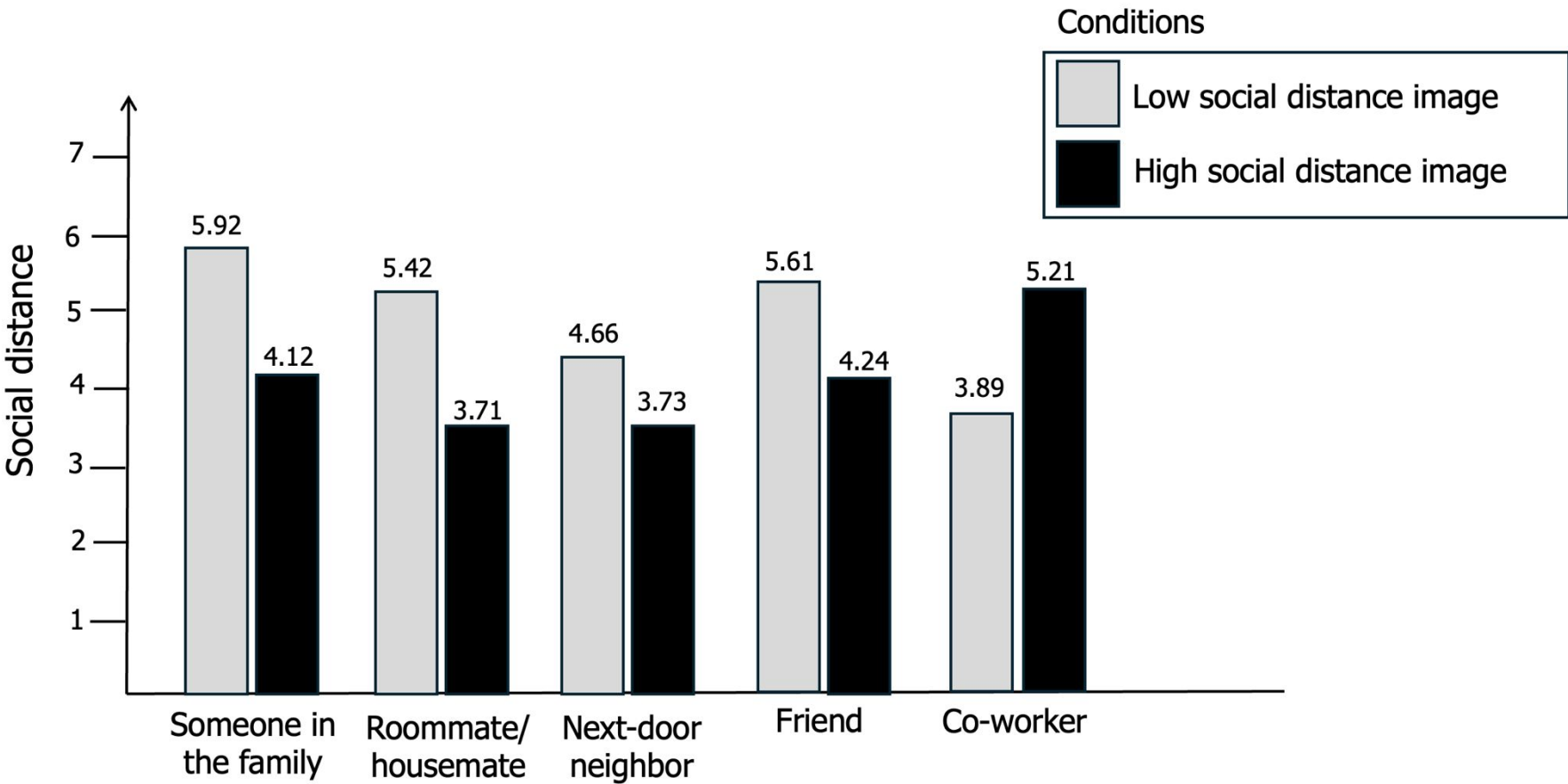
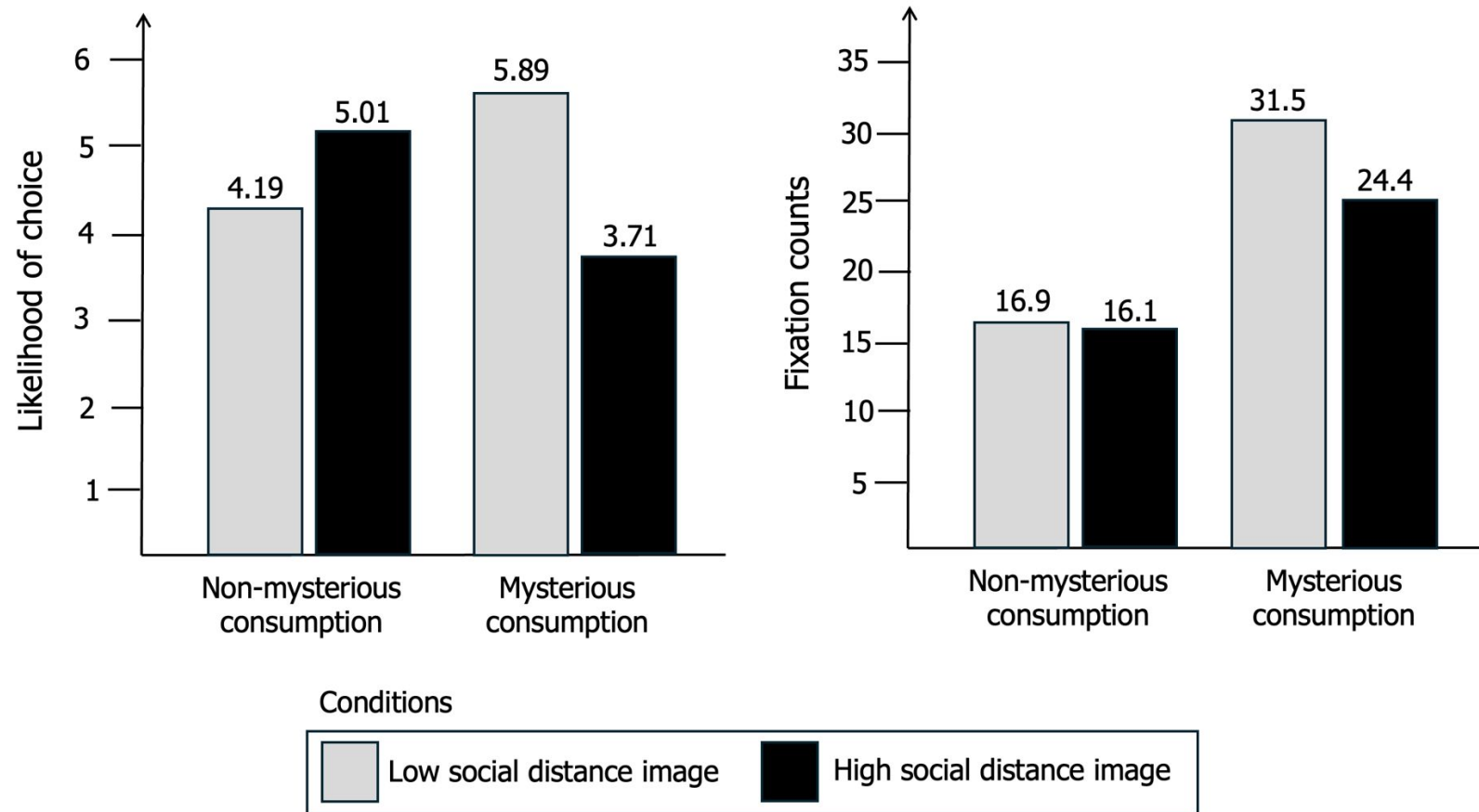


Figure 2: Social distance manipulation check

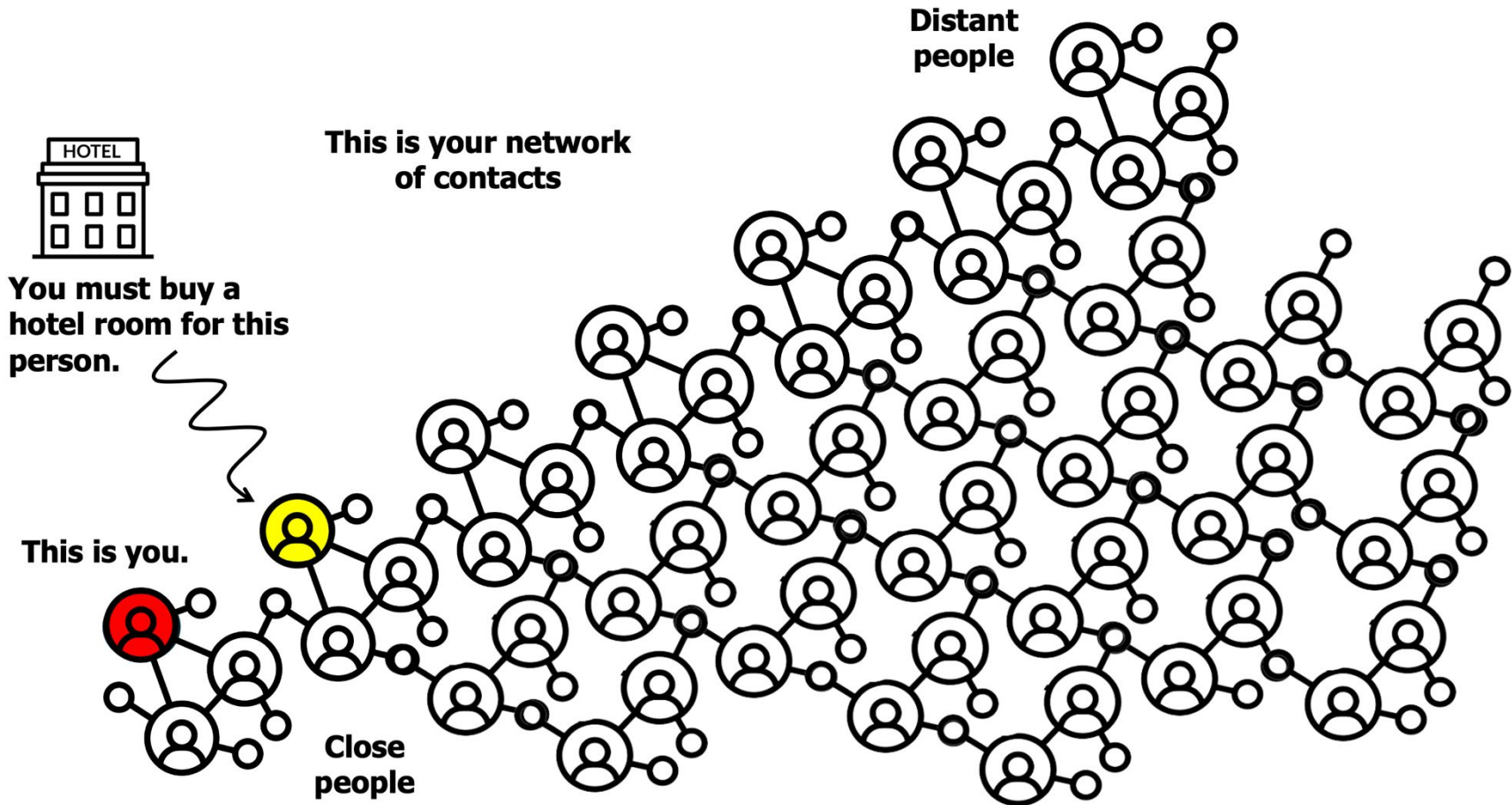


**Figure 3:** Results of hypotheses H2 and H3

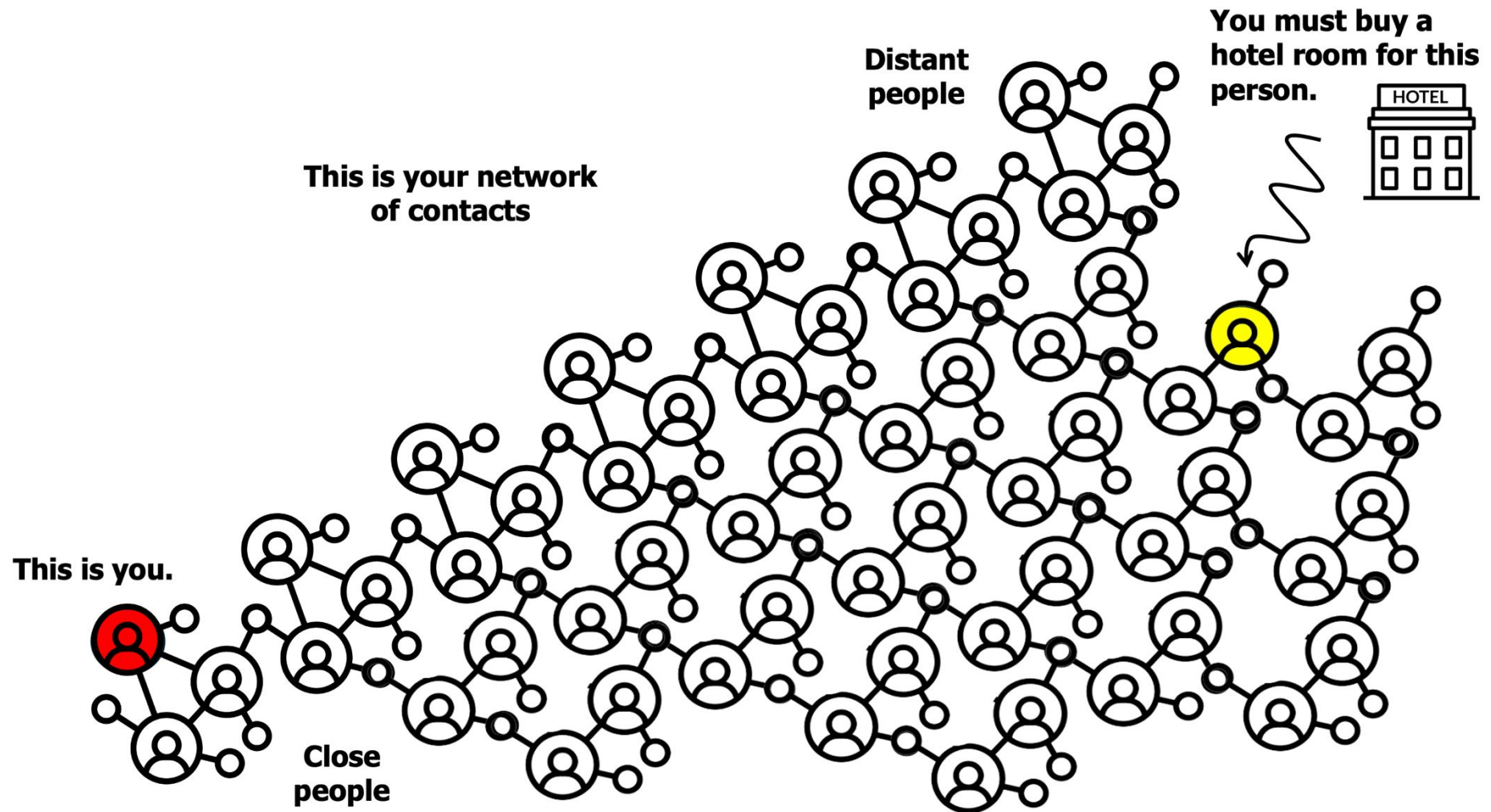


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Appendix 1a: Socially close image



Appendix 1b: Socially distance image



Appendix B - Images used in Study 2



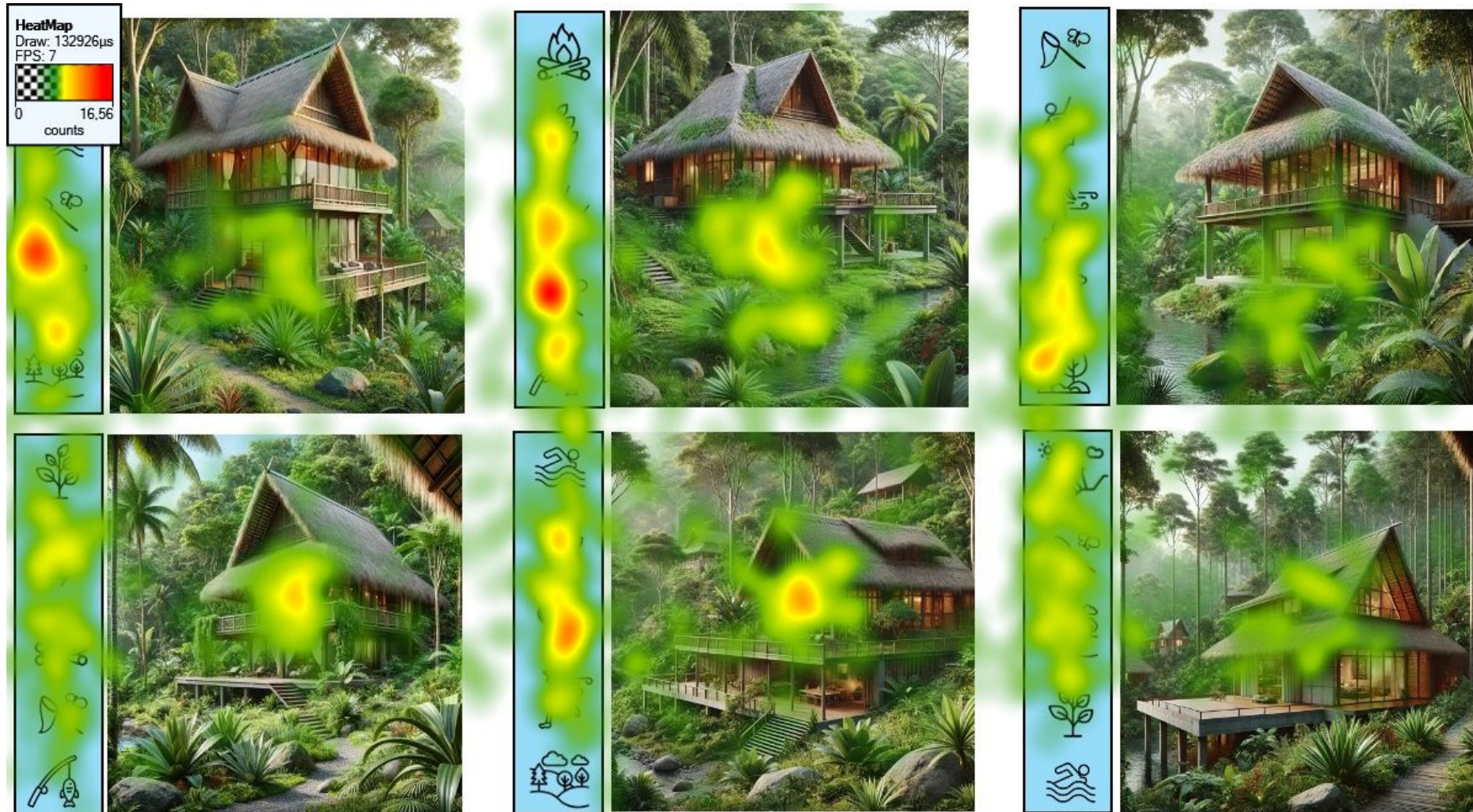
Appendix B - Images used in Study 2 (cont.)



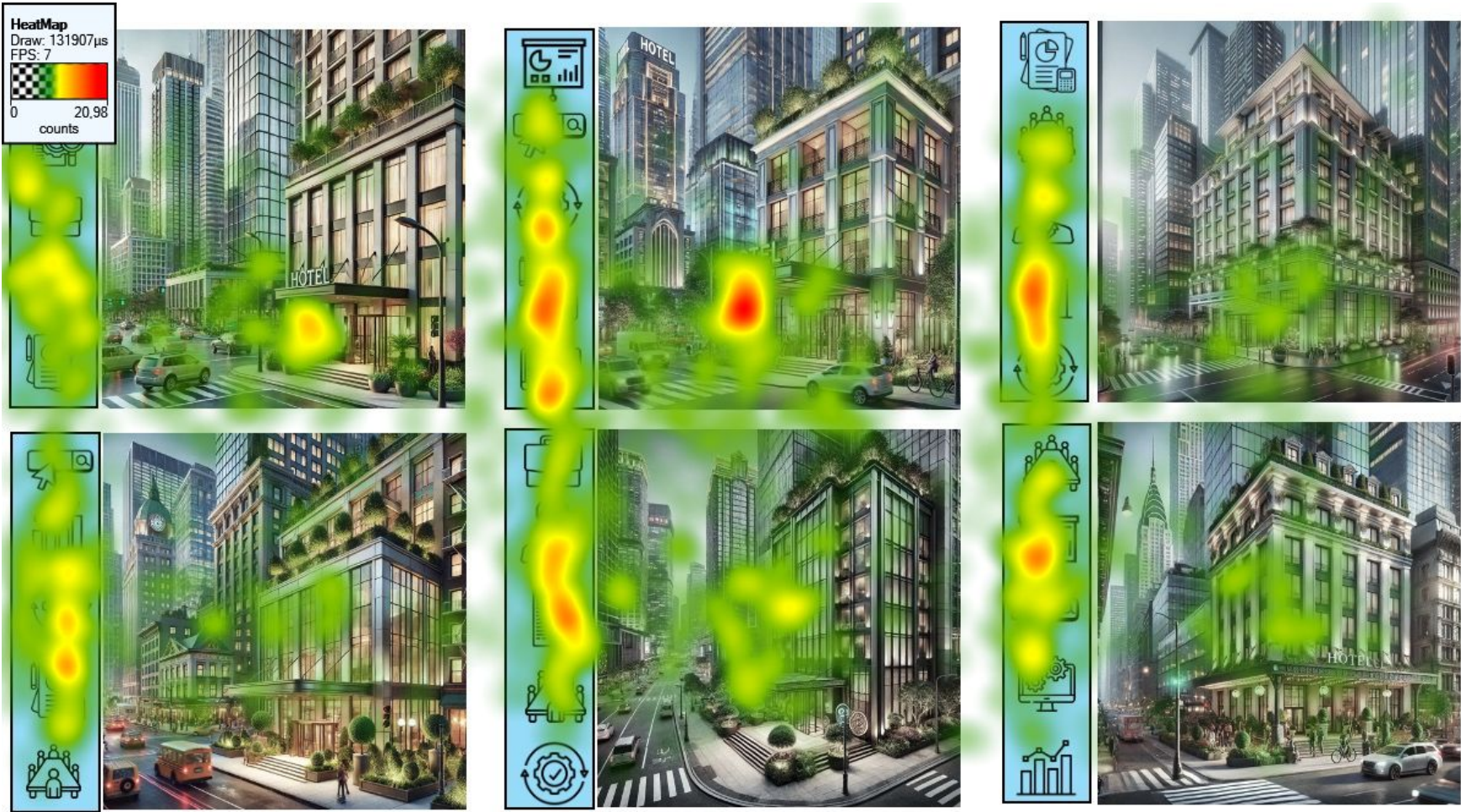
**Appendix B** - Images used in Study 2 (cont.)



Appendix C - Heatmap of Study 2



Appendix C - Heatmap of Study 2 (cont.)



Appendix C - Heatmap of Study 2

