

**How to overcome the intention-behavior gap in sustainable tourism: a perspective article for
Tourism Agenda 2030**

Giampaolo Viglia^{a,b}, and Diletta Acuti^a

^aUniversity of Portsmouth, Department of Marketing, Portland Street, PO1 3DE, UK.

^bUniversity of Aosta Valley, Department of Economics and Political Science, Street Cappuccini 2,
11100 Aosta, Italy.

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Perspective article

Introduction

Sustainable tourism is critical to achieving, directly or indirectly, all of the Goals defined by the United Nations for sustainable development. It has been included as a specific target in Goals 8, 12, and 14 as a lever for pursuing inclusive and sustainable economic growth, sustainable consumption and production, and the sustainable use of oceans and marine resources, respectively (UNWTO, 2022). Business scholars can help managers and policy makers to understand how to adopt production practices that protect the environment and society, and enhance the consumers' preferences for sustainable products and services. In particular, researchers should help understanding the gap between intentions and behaviour that exists in sustainable tourism. The positive attitude of tourists towards sustainable products or services does not emerge as a reliable predictor of making sustainable vacation choices (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014). This inconsistency makes it difficult for tourism decision makers to design effective strategies that increase the sustainability of places around the world. We believe that it is possible to mitigate this issue by redefining *what* we observe and *how* we observe it.

Key developments towards Tourism 2030

In the sustainable behavior literature, there is a widely recognized gap between what consumers say and what they actually do, the so-called "intention-behavior gap" or "attitude-behavior gap". Consumers have shown a positive attitude towards sustainable behaviour, but often cannot translate this into a green holiday option (Shaw, 2016). This discrepancy is one of the biggest challenges for destination marketers, policy makers, and nonprofits seeking to encourage sustainable behavior (White et al., 2019).

Consumers say they do not want to harm the environment or the community, but the gap in intentional behavior is especially noticeable in sustainable tourism, as they are unlikely to give up the joy of unsustainable choices (Aga et al., 2020). For example, some consumers who express their love for animals do not renounce participation in activities where nature is forcefully reshaped to produce tourist experiences (Duffy, 2014). Tourists traveling to the Arctic to watch their beloved polar bears willfully ignore their contribution to climate change and indirect effect on pack ice (D'Souza et al., 2021). In fact, many factors can hinder the actual realization of consumers' more sustainable behavioral intent and the conversion of everyday sustainable behavior into travel decisions.

To make the tourism of the future more sustainable, organisations need to remove the barriers that impede the development of sustainable travelers' behaviour. Therefore, it is critical to understand how tourism researchers can assess the motivational pathway between talking and walking more comprehensively and realistically.

Contribution to Sustainable Development Goals

To enhance the contribution of scholars to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals, it is key to understand how to alleviate the distance between consumers' intentions and behavior. We believe that future studies should rethink *what* to observe and *how* to observe it (See figure 1).

With respect to the former, we want to encourage sustainable tourism scholars to measure what is *done* more than what is *stated*. In some cases, research assumes that what consumers say is actually true, overlooking the social desirability of their claims. Declaring the willingness to behave sustainably is socially appreciated. However, this does not mean that consumers have the real intention of transforming their claims into reality. In other words, the intention may be missing.

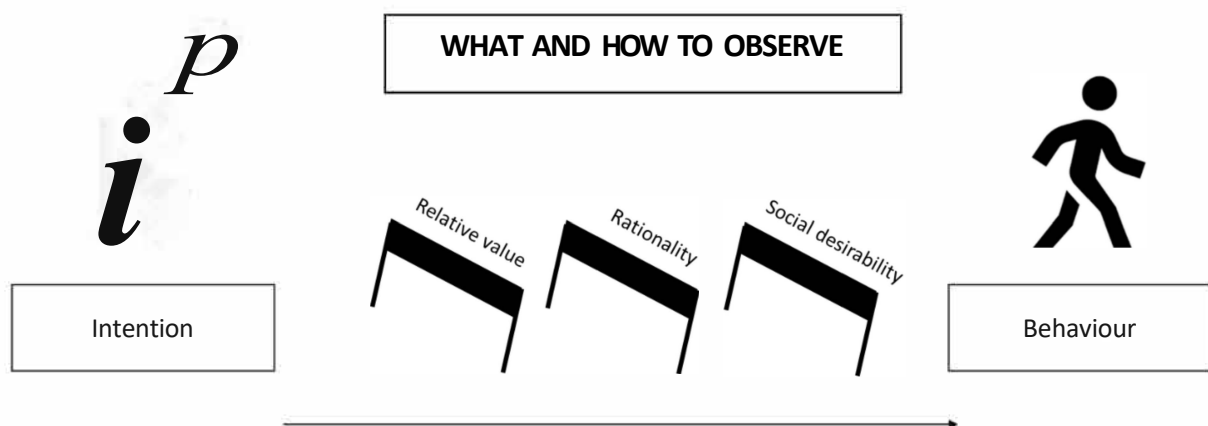
Several papers have adopted the theory of planned behaviour or the theory of reasoned action to investigate sustainable consumption, thus assuming that consumer behaviour is *rational* and disconnected from a broader social and cultural context (Hassan et al., 2016). Instead, it is important to consider many other less-controllable factors that influence how consumers behave. For instance, *perceptual* interpretations and judgments strongly influence our preferences, despite our intention to be green consumers (Johnstone & Tan, 2015). Indeed, sustainable products and services can bring with them undesired perceptions that elicit cognitive and emotional aversive states and, in turn, compromise consumer behavior (Acuti et al., 2022). Scholars should also consider the *relative* value of sustainability rather than just its *absolute* value (Randle et al., 2019). In other words, tourists can place relatively high importance on the sustainable features of products, but not at the expense of other key attributes (such as functionality, quality, or aesthetics).

Regarding *how* to study sustainable tourism, some scholars have proposed incorporating means of action into sustainable consumption, rather than relying solely on consumer evaluation (Essiz & Mandrik, 2022). This stream of literature describes "excessive reliance on quantitative survey formats that promote rational reactions rather than dealing with everyday hedonistic shopping reactions" and "socially desirable reactions by respondents". It acknowledges some methodological problems of the current empirical approach, such as "the desire to be good Citizens" (Caruana et al., 2016, p. 216).

The limits of self-reported intervention, the risk of social desirability bias, and the obligatory nature of studies conducted in a controlled environment require the need to move to studies with higher behavioral realism. It is not possible to rely entirely on research based on respondents' claims to study how consumer behaviour changes (Gneezy, 2017). Few studies use field research to directly observe

actual consumer behavior in the tourism industry. For example, looking at the papers published in *Tourism Review* in 2022, only 8 of 69 have adopted a field study or have analysed secondary (real) data. No papers have conducted field experiments that are particularly useful for investigating consumer behavior, as they have high external validity and enable to demonstrate that a certain intervention works in the real-life context (Viglia & Dolnicar, 2020). Therefore, it is important to provide reliable and generalized knowledge to improve the ecology of research (Van Heerde et al., 2021) and understand how consumers, organization, or policy makers can help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Field experiments (Grazzini et al., 2018), field observations (Minton et al., 2020), (N)ethnography (Herjanto et al., 2021), and secondary data (D'Lima et al., 2018) can all complement the package of studies. This doesn't mean we should neglect the utility of online or laboratory studies. Indeed, studies conducted in fictional settings can be useful to complement field studies (for instance identifying psychological mechanisms that lead to certain behaviours) and enhance the robustness of findings (Can et al., 2020).

Figure 1. The intention-behaviour gap



Conclusions

Tourism is recognized as a core industry to generate a shift toward sustainable development. Thus, researchers should help practitioners to understand the consumers' real response to inclusive, equitable, and sustainable tourism, consistently with the values promoted by the Sustainable Development Goals (Scheyvens & Cheer, 2021). The intention-behavior gap represents one of the obstacles that impede an effective assessment and prediction of how tourists behave. We encourage scholars to consider consumers' perceptions and the relative value they attribute to sustainability in their decision-making and to conduct field studies that observe consumer behavior in the real world and measure not just the intentions, but what is actually happening.

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