



## Research article

# Consumer hypocrisy and researcher myopia: A scrutiny of the intention-behaviour gap in sustainable tourism

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 31 December 2022

Received in revised form 6 September 2023

Accepted 18 September 2023

Available online xxxx

Associate editor: Lorenzo Masiero

## Keywords:

Intention-behaviour gap

Sustainable tourism

Consumer hypocrisy

Experimental realism

Tourist behaviour

## ABSTRACT

A discrepancy between tourists' intentions and behaviour threatens the effectiveness of interventions to favour sustainable choices. To reduce the gap between intentions and behaviour, one should consider both the consumer's and the researcher's shortcomings. On the one hand, consumers amplify the discrepancy between their sayings and doings through their hypocritical behaviour. On the other hand, researchers often aggravate the intention-behaviour gap because of their methodological myopia (e.g., by focusing on non-behavioural outcomes, or by working with unrealistic research settings). This paper offers some specific recommendations to address consumer hypocrisy. We also provide researchers with some methodological advice on how to minimise possible biases by i) defining ambitious research goals, ii) mitigating the researcher's invasiveness, and iii) adopting strong behavioural measures.

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*"I will stare directly at the Sun, but never in the mirror. It's me, Hi, I am the problem, it's me."*

[Taylor Swift – Anti Hero]

## Introduction

This article has the ambitious goal of making us better tourists and better researchers. At the time of the 50th Anniversary of Annals of Tourism Research, we are witnessing the pressing need to tackle the societal issues of a challenging environment (Chandy et al., 2021). Marketing interventions have the power to transform the habits of tourists (MacInnes et al., 2022). In fact, tourists are increasingly aware of the societal and environmental spillovers of their experiences and frequently demand sustainable products and services (Han, 2021; He et al., 2018). A recent report suggests that, as of February 2022, 81 % of travellers worldwide claim that sustainable travel is important (Statista Research Department, 2022). Despite this trend, there is evidence of a mismatch between tourists' intentions - and attitudes - towards sustainability and their actual behaviour (i.e., intention-

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behaviour gap or attitude-behaviour gap). Indeed, consumers do not behave in the same way as they do when they are at home: tourism, through its hedonistic and self-centred nature, often suspends morality also for conscious tourists (Dolnicar, 2020; Fennell, 2008).

The tourism context can require decisions that differ from the ones in everyday life, like booking an environmentally accredited hotel (Ganglmair-Wooliscroft & Wooliscroft, 2016). Some responsible actions require further awareness when consumers are on vacation (e.g., councils in tourism destinations may use different colours for recycling bins compared with home councils) or an extra effort (e.g., the use of public transports may limit the number of accessible places) that prevents sustainable choices. This mismatch becomes even more prominent as worldwide institutions urge tourism practitioners to be aligned with the sustainable development goals (SDGs). This work investigates the factors leading to the attitude-behaviour gap and discusses strategies to bridge this gap. Bridging the attitude-behaviour gap will help tackle SDG11 about responsible consumption and production. Developing sustainable tourism solutions will contribute to SDG12 on sustainable cities and communities. Working towards these two goals ultimately helps reduce inequalities (SDG10) and fight climate change (SDG13).

By responding to recent calls to investigate the intention-behaviour gap from a conceptual standpoint (e.g., Viglia & Acuti, 2023) we critically review the papers published on this field in the last decade. We start from the observation that intentions do not exist in some cases, reported behaviours are not true, and behavioural measurements are inaccurate. This argument makes us question the current interpretations of the attitude behaviour gap in sustainable tourism. We do so by proposing the existence of two dimensions behind the intention-behaviour gap: the “consumer angle” and the “researcher angle”. The former dimension tackles *why* intentions may not exist and reported behaviours may not be true, while the latter addresses *why* behavioural measurements may be inaccurate. In light of this, the present work (1) provides an overview of the work published in the tourism discipline that recognises the existence of the intention-behaviour gap in the last 10 years; (2) discusses the role that consumer hypocrisy plays in fostering this gap; (3) identifies the methodological aspects that should be adopted when investigating tourists' behaviour; and (4) advances specific and actionable methodological recommendations in the form of a checklist for tourism researchers. We start from the contemporary limitations of the literature to move the research on the field forward.

We propose four ways to overcome the intention-behaviour gap in sustainable tourism. First, we discuss how consumers have multiple – and even contradictory – ethical priorities that cannot be translated into actions. For this reason, especially in tourism, researchers should shift their focus from the factors impeding a talk-walk consistency towards the acknowledgement of multiple ethical priorities. Second, we show that consumers' declared intentions are biased due to the social desirability of behaving sustainably and other factors like social norms. We offer specific recommendations for researchers on how to reduce the social desirability bias of respondents (e.g., by revealing their hypocritical behaviour or by enhancing their involvement in the study). Third, projects that aim to derive behavioural-change recommendations for the tourism sector should define ambitious research goals and study tourists' actual behaviour. Thus, researchers should prioritise natural field studies testing research interventions oriented towards behavioural change. Fourth, we highlight the importance of realism. When field studies cannot be conducted, data collection techniques should be as close as possible to the phenomenon at stake. We need more studies testing interventions – especially the environmental ones – in real settings (see for instance Kallbekken & Sælen, 2013). To facilitate this, we provide a number of recommendations on how to increase behavioural realism in online and lab experiments.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. The first section presents an overview of the main studies that acknowledge the existence of the intention-behaviour gap in sustainable tourism, covering the last 10 years of the discipline in line with other literature reviews (e.g., Kemperman, 2021 or Blevins et al., 2022). The second section introduces the term “consumer hypocrisy” as a factor that explains the – apparent – occurrence of the gap. The third section describes researcher-related factors that accentuate the gap. Afterwards, we develop four pathways to overcome the gap and provide specific methodological recommendations for tourism scholars in the form of a checklist. Finally, the last section presents the conclusion and future directions for research on sustainable tourism with particular attention to relevance, rigour, and quality.

## The sustainability intention-behaviour gap in tourism over the last decade

The intention-behaviour gap is one of the biggest challenges for researchers seeking to contribute to the field of sustainable consumption. Indeed, most consumers say they want to purchase sustainable products, yet only a tiny minority actually does so (Nguyen et al., 2022). Despite pro-environmental attitudes, intentions to recycle, or willingness to pay extra premiums for eco-friendly products, few consumers show regular sustainable buying behaviour. Indeed, several individual characteristics, product characteristics and situational factors hinder sustainable consumption (Park & Lin, 2020). Narrowing this discrepancy has become a priority for researchers, as the environmental impact of businesses mainly depends on consumers' choices in terms of products' purchase and disposal (White et al., 2019). Hence, research in marketing and social psychology has focused on the drivers of sustainable products purchase and disposal to understand how to minimise this intention-behaviour gap (Tezer & Bodur, 2020; White et al., 2020). The evidence offered by the literature is fragmented, ranging from studies establishing a model of this gap for ethically minded consumers (e.g., Carrington et al., 2010) to studies that neglect the existence of the gap (e.g., Caruana et al., 2016).

Research on the relationship between intentions and behaviours has been guided by a few theories, with the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1985) being one of the most widely adopted in the marketing and tourism literature. This theory argues that behavioural intentions predict actual behaviour. More specifically, attitude towards the behaviour, subjective norm and perceived behavioural control act as antecedents of intention, which – in turn – influences behaviour (Ajzen, 1985). Stemming

**Table 1**  
Main contributions on the intention-behaviour gap in sustainable tourism.

Theme	Sub-theme	Authors	Setting	Theoretical basis	Intention-behaviour gap findings
Intrinsic	Cognitive Dissonance	Juvan and Dolnicar (2014)	Sustainable behaviour at home vs vacation	Cognitive dissonance theory Theory of planned behaviour Attribution theory Value belief norm theory Social comparison theory	- Environmental activists feel a tension between their <b>attitudes</b> towards the environment and its protection and their <b>vacation behaviour</b> . - As environmental activists feel guilty about harming the environment by going on vacation, they construct beliefs to reduce this tension <b>without changing behaviour</b> .
		McDonald et al. (2015)	Decision making in the context of air travel	Cognitive dissonance theory	- Awareness that flying harms the environment and green <b>attitude</b> do not necessarily lead to <b>behavioural change</b> of consumers. - Given the inconsistency between their attitudes and behaviours, consumers find <b>justifications</b> (about travel products, context, or personal identity) <b>to not change their air travel behaviour</b> .
	Individual Concerns	Reis and Higham (2017)	Climate concerns and air travel behaviour	Action scepticism dilemma	- Non-frequent air travellers <b>don't show guilt about the attitude behaviour gap</b> . They deny responsibility and offer explanations based on their individual inability to bring change. - Emphasis to move from individual action/sacrifice and place <b>higher responsibility on policy makers/government</b> .
		Sadiq et al. (2022)	Staying at eco-friendly hotels	Value attitude behaviour theory	- Consumers' environmental <b>attitude</b> has a <b>limited effect on consumers' sustainable behaviour</b> . - <b>Service quality</b> is a key factor for potentially <b>bridging the attitude-behaviour gap</b> in the eco-friendly hotel context.
	Convenience	Cohen et al. (2013)	Sustainable behaviour at home vs vacation	Modern sociological theory Postmodern theory	- Environmental <b>awareness</b> and pro-environmental <b>attitudes</b> do not in <b>practice</b> translate to voluntary sustained behavioural changes. - There are fundamental barriers to <b>changing</b> discretionary air travel behaviour, even among pro-environmental consumers.
	Extrinsic	Contextual Factors	Birch and Memery (2020)	Local food tourism	Intention behaviour discrepancy
Higham et al. (2016)			Climate concerns and air travel behaviour	Modernist and postmodernist tourism perspectives	- Despite the tourists' climate concerns, <b>the gap between intentions and behaviour exists due to cost and convenience factors</b> involved with air travel.
Wu et al. (2021)			Sustainable intention on holiday vs sustainable behaviour at home	Attitude behaviour context theory Theory of planned behaviour	- Pro-environmental <b>intention</b> on holiday <b>does not translate into actual pro-environmental behaviour</b> at home. - Pro-environmental intentions and behaviour <b>do not change over time or location</b> . However, the availability of infrastructure affects and enables pro-environmental behaviour.
Marketing communication		Chi et al. (2022)	Role of green certification in hotel booking	Stimulus organism response Social identity theory Self-regulation theory Service value theory	- Green hotel certifications positively influence consumers 'intention' to visit but <b>the intentions do not translate into actual behaviours</b> . - Providing <b>green certification and comparable pricing information</b> to customers has the potential to fill the intention behaviour gap and transforms green intentions into actual booking behaviour.
		Grazzini et al. (2018)	Message framing and hotel guests' recycling behaviour	Prospect theory Construal level theory	- <b>Both loss and gain-framed messages have a positive impact</b> on recycling <b>intention</b> and <b>behaviour</b> in comparison to the absence of messages. - More hotel guests depict recycling intention and behaviour when a concrete message is paired with the loss-framed message, due to <b>high perceived self-efficacy</b> .
		Karlsson and Dolnicar (2016)	Role of eco-certification in selling sustainable tours	Social desirability bias	- Eco-labels do not considerably affect the <b>actual demand</b> of all tourists due to lack of knowledge, despite their potential <b>intentions</b> . - <b>A niche segment</b> (older and better educated tourists) <b>is influenced by eco-labels</b> when comparing alternative tour providers for decision making.

from this theory, researchers have widely considered consumers' intentions as a proxy of concrete behaviours (e.g., Fielding et al., 2008; or Roos & Hahn, 2017). Over the last few decades, however, scholars across several disciplines have questioned the applicability of this theory to their research endeavours. As a result, some authors have enriched the core model of the theory of planned behaviour by introducing additional constructs. For instance, in the field of food consumption, an extension of the theory includes the construct of habit (De Bruijn et al., 2007). The authors show that the link between intention and actual consumption is significant for low and medium levels of habit, and non-significant in the high habit group. This suggests that an intention-behaviour gap exists in consumption occasions where consumers have built strong habits. One of the main debates revolves around the dissonance between intention and behaviour in ethical consumption. Carrington et al. (2010) advance a novel framework that proposes the mediating role of planning (also called implementation intention) in the main relationship and the moderating roles of actual behavioural control and situational context. In their review of studies addressing the intention-behaviour gap, Hassan et al. (2016) highlight that there is still a lack of understanding of how intentions may, or may not, convert into actions.

The propositions of the theory of planned behaviour are suitable for situations where consumers have control of their behaviour and can effectively translate their intentions into actions (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2017). This does not necessarily apply to the tourism context, where we can find evidence of a mismatch between intentions and actual behaviour. For instance, McKercher and Tse (2012) find a no statistically significant correlation between intention and actual repeat visitation rates. As mentioned earlier, tourism brings many obstacles to eco-consumers, who morally disengage easily when they are on vacation (Dolnicar, 2020; Ganglmair-Wooliscroft & Wooliscroft, 2016). Given its peculiar characteristics, the tourism context needs a closer and specific investigation of the reasons why consumers report favourable attitudes towards pro-environmental behaviours without displaying sustainable actions. Therefore, several studies have investigated the sources of inconsistency between tourists' supposed intentions and actions in the tourism field. The works by Cohen et al. (2013) and Juvan and Dolnicar (2014) explicitly address and set the basis for studies contributing to the tourists' intention-behaviour gap. They highlight how even individuals that take environmental action at home do not engage in those behaviours while on vacation. Since the publication of these articles above, the tourism discipline has witnessed an increasing attention to the gap, with mixed findings. Nonetheless, this evidence of a sort of "tourists' vacation mode" seems sticky (see for instance Grazzini et al., 2018).

Understanding the factors behind the intention-behaviour gap in tourism represents a starting point for designing interventions to foster environmentally sustainable tourism behaviours. Accordingly, in the last decade, tourism researchers have integrated, complemented or overcome the theory of planned behaviour, explaining the intention-behaviour inconsistency from different theoretical angles. To synthesize this research stream, we adopted a systematic approach to guide the literature review provided in Appendix 1 (see supplementary files). According to this table, we identify five determinants that explain the intention-behaviour gap in tourism. Three of them are intrinsic to the tourist (i.e., cognitive dissonance, individual concerns, and convenience). Other two are extrinsic (i.e., contextual factors and marketing communications).

Tourists may experience cognitive dissonance when they become aware that their positive sustainable attitudes do not align with their vacation behaviour (McDonald et al., 2015). In response, they deny responsibility and/or offer justifications for their behaviour based on their individual inability to face social comparison (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014). As a possible solution, there is the direct involvement of policy interventions that override tourists' individual responsibility (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014; McDonald et al., 2015). The second intrinsic determinant is individual concerns. Individual personality traits may create concerns about travel behaviour and ultimately affect their travel-related decisions. Travel motivation or lack of interest play a significant role in shaping travel behaviour. For instance, non-frequent (vs. frequent) tourists are less interested and more sceptical towards sustainable travel and depict an unwillingness to change their existing travel behaviour (Reis & Higham, 2017). On the contrary, tourists with health and environment concerns are more interested in sustainable travel options and more likely to exhibit sustainable behaviour such as choosing eco-friendly hotels (Sadiq et al., 2022). Finally, convenience may take priority in holiday-related decisions (Cohen et al., 2013) and consumers seem less interested in reducing carbon emissions or, more in general, make environmentally friendly choices (Khoo-Lattimore & Prideaux, 2013).

Moving to extrinsic factors, the consumption context plays a critical role in shaping sustainable tourism behaviour. Contextual factors include for instance the hotel premises and the transportation mode (Higham et al., 2016); or the presence (or lack) of physical infrastructure (Cohen et al., 2013; Wu et al., 2021). Another set of extrinsic determinants relates to tourism marketing communications. From a communication perspective, persuasive messages can stimulate tourists' sustainable behaviour and mitigate the intention-behaviour gap. For instance, green hotel certifications or the use of eco-labels in tourism tours not only have a positive influence on tourists' intentions but can also help to overcome their initial lack of knowledge (Chi et al., 2022; Karlsson & Dolnicar, 2016). Furthermore, the framing of marketing messages can promote sustainable behaviour. For instance, loss-framed messages have been found to enhance tourists' recycling behaviour (Grazzini et al., 2018).

As presented in Table 1, intrinsic and extrinsic determinants explain the existence of the intention-behaviour gap in sustainable tourism.

Previous evidence discusses the causes of the intention-behaviour gap, provides justifications for it, and advances potential ways to overcome it. However, to the best of our knowledge, none of these studies questions the existence of the intention-behaviour gap in tourism. Many obstacles can make it difficult for consumers to behave sustainably according to their intentions. We portray that, in some cases, intentions do not exist, reported behaviours are not true, and behavioural measurements are inaccurate. Responding to this provocative observation, we explore two angles that need to be considered to overcome the intention-behaviour gap: i) the consumer angle and ii) the researcher angle.

## The consumer angle: intentional and unintentional hypocrisy

Hypocrisy has been defined as “any sort of gap between word and deed” (Szabados & Soifer, 1999, p. 60) and occurs when “observable actions differ from [...] observable statements” (Janney & Gove, 2011, p. 1569). In the field of consumer behaviour, hypocritical consumers tend not to translate the moral principles and social norms they profess to uphold into their behaviours (Gillani et al., 2021). In some cases hypocrisy may occur unintentionally, in other cases consumers intentionally lie - to the interlocutor or themselves - regarding their intentions or past behaviours. This occurrence confers the consumers themselves the responsibility for the intention-behaviour gap existence and shows the need for researchers to understand why words are not translated into actions. Specifically, if tourism scholars so far have investigated the barriers to sustainable tourism behaviour, they should also consider the reliability of tourists' claims or reported actions. More specifically, acknowledging the existence of consumer hypocrisy brings two main considerations for sustainable tourism research.

### *Unintentional hypocrisy leads to a discrepancy between intentions and behaviour*

A consumer is unintentionally hypocritical when the lack of alignment between statements and demonstrated actions is involuntary (Wagner et al., 2020). Being a sustainable tourist implies behaving responsibly in several tourism contexts and making tourism decisions that take into consideration the sustainability of a certain service or good (e.g., booking a hotel because it uses renewable energy despite its higher price). However, the existence of multiple ethical priorities can lead to paradoxical situations in which the choice for a responsible option is made at the cost of another ethical benefit. This paradox occurs because tourists (as consumers) hold a plurality of moralities that sometimes is not possible to implement altogether. For instance, a tourist may prefer to drive to a farm market that sells organic and local vegetables compared to shopping at a closer market without the need to drive (hence reducing air pollution).

The coexistence of multiple moralities is relatively new in the field of sustainable tourism and opens up the possibility of a reconceptualization of the intention-behaviour gap. Multiple ethical priorities can lead to different actions across different consumption situations (Virginie et al., 2022). Instead of “filling” the gap or reconciling (multiple) intentions and behaviours, researchers should observe how tourists prioritise certain ethical responsibilities compared to others. These priorities of consumers can also influence how they recall their consumption choices. Indeed, memory affects consumers' recall and evaluation of products (Beatty & Smith, 1987; Ratchford, 2001). When it comes to reporting a consumption decision, they retrieve information from their memory. For instance, consumers can report that they paid attention to room size due to the size of their family but forget to mention that they also consider the hotel green actions. The interplay between ethical priorities and memory is particularly important in tourism, as consumers are confronted with consumption situations that are different from the ones of their daily life. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the potential dynamism of moralities, such as evolving ethical responsibilities and intentions, with changing priorities. Finally, moralities and ethical behaviours can also be shaped by culture (Belk et al., 2005; Kim et al., 2010). A recent meta-analysis suggests that national culture plays a moderating role in tourist sustainable intentions and behaviours (Hansen et al., 2023). According to this meta-analysis tourists from cultures with high power distance are less likely to transmit their home behaviour into sustainable behavioural intention. On the contrary, a more individualistic culture seems to positively moderate the relationship between attitude and sustainable behavioural intention.

### *Intentional hypocrisy reflects an inconsistency between what is false and what is true*

A consumer is intentionally hypocritical when voluntarily expressing false claims and projecting false or unrealistic appearances (Guèvremont, 2019). This happens when tourists strive for social approval. In this case, tourists do not have the real intention of transforming their claims into reality and deliberately lie to their interlocutor (e.g. another tourist, hotel personnel or tourism researchers). This results in the reporting of false attitudes or intentions. Intentional hypocrisy also occurs when tourists - in presence of others - are biased by social desirability and behave differently. Beyond social desirability, researchers also indicate how public observability, social norms, and social group memberships may affect sustainable behaviours (White et al., 2020). For instance, a tourist might try to reduce food waste if there are other guests at the table but may not care about wastefulness if alone. Voluntary consumer hypocrisy challenges the existence of a real gap as either the talk (intention) or the walk (behaviour) is not genuine.

On the one hand, because of social desirability or the projection of their ideal self, hypocritical tourists may report values that they do not actually hold. In this case, the gap is between (false) claims and actual behaviour. Hence, the intention may be missing. The lack of intention can also occur when consumers behave responsibly for reasons that are not related to sustainability (Beall et al., 2021). This creates a sort of ‘unconscious deceit’ that can affect consumer behaviour research.

On the other hand, hypocritical tourists can describe their vacation choices as more sustainable than they actually are. In doing so, they create a gap between their claimed values and their (false) actual decisions, i.e., they lie about their decisions and report (eco-)actions that have not occurred. Several responsible travellers continually negotiate the tensions triggered by the misalignment between their environmental aspirations and their deeds. The willingness to signal their virtue to others can make them pick sustainable choices (maybe the least inconvenient for themselves) and omit the unsustainable ones (Mkono, 2020).

An additional form of hypocrisy is enacted by consumers when they willfully misremember the information related to the unsustainability of certain services they consume (Reczek et al., 2018). For instance, when engaging in a safari, tourists may want to ignore the potential alterations of animals' natural behaviour that this activity entails. This mechanism - called wilfully

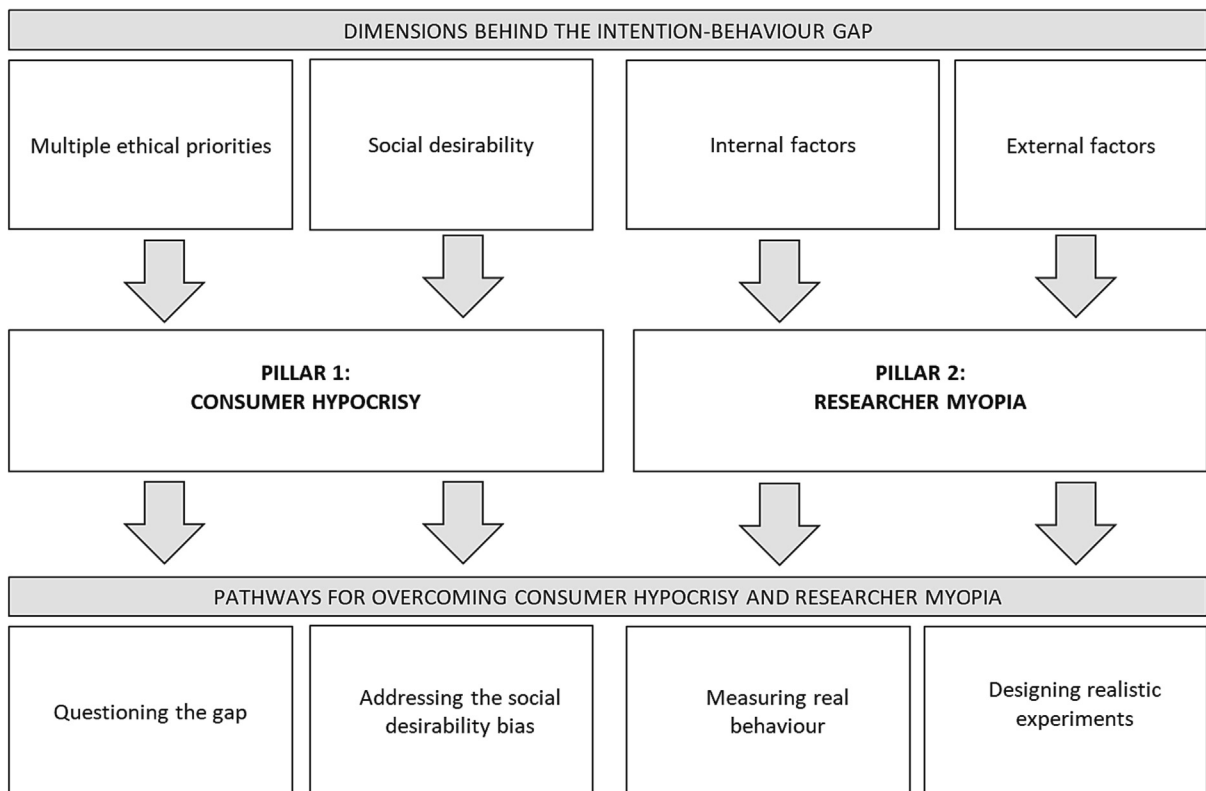


Fig. 1. How to address the two pillars of the intention-behaviour gap.

ignorant memory - is triggered by the desire of tourists to avoid the negative feelings that derive from the awareness of behaving irresponsibly, such as guilt or shame. Such wilful misremembering occurs because we are not just rational actors. Feelings and emotions can make us lie even to ourselves.

### The researcher angle: methodological myopia

We refer to “researcher myopia” as the inability of researchers to measure the actual behaviour of tourists when their aim is to demonstrate the existence of a behavioural phenomenon. This inability can be linked to a number of factors related to both the researcher and the setting (internal factors), as well as external factors. Some research projects have *unambitious research goals*. This is often due to the publish or perish pressure, where we feel the urge to publish articles even if they offer a marginal contribution (Lee & Benjamin, 2023; McKercher & Dolnicar, 2022). Impactful research aiming at modifying tourists' behaviour should necessarily provide insights on how tourists alter their actual behaviours. However, scholars often embark on research projects that originate from research questions that focus on non-behavioural outcomes (e.g. attitudes, intentions). While research on attitudes and intentions might be necessary to advance knowledge on the psychological mechanism behind a phenomenon (Morales et al., 2017), when the goal of a project is to derive practical implications, choosing non-behavioural outcomes evidences research myopia. This choice often results in pure speculation with a lack of meaningful real implications.

Second, we refer to *sub-optimal behavioural measures* when researchers use proxies of real behaviour instead of collecting actual tourist behaviour. It is common to find studies using the construct of intention as a proxy of actual behaviour. However, intention is a necessary but not sufficient condition to infer actual behaviour (Frommeyer et al., 2022; McKercher & Tse, 2012). Examples of this practice include studies measuring the so-called construct of behavioural intention (e.g., Wang & Lyu, 2019), and studies measuring (self-reported) behaviour using self-evaluations items like “I feel that I have played a great part in helping the environment when I stayed in eco-friendly hotels” (Sadiq et al., 2022). We can also find examples of more sophisticated measures like “click-through” behaviour (e.g., Can et al., 2021). Despite being more realistic than self-reported intention, having clicked does not imply real consequences for the tourist (i.e., they click for information purposes, but nothing is hired or purchased). Another example could be the use of a monetary incentive for participants in an experiment. Researchers often provide participants with a small budget that they can use to engage in a transaction during the experiment (e.g., using part of the budget to leave a tip at a fictional restaurant). While incentives inject behavioural realism into the resulting outcome, the monetary transaction does not happen naturally (i.e., it is not their own money) and might bias the results. Sub-optimal measurement could also include the use of participants that are not real tourists, that is, they have not experienced the tourism activity, or participants

that are unable to undertake behavioural actions (e.g., student samples). Finally, self-reported measures might lead to biased responses given that participants can judge themselves what is relevant to disclose.

The third group of factors behind researcher myopia relates to the research setting: *research invasiveness*. Research interventions might become a source of research myopia when they involve a distortion of the real setting. This may result in an artificial atmosphere where tourists become fully aware of the investigation and may behave differently. There are relevant studies investigating behaviour in the field that - nonetheless - suffer from this artificial set up. An example of this issue can be found in [Amatulli et al. \(2021\)](#). The study tests whether a sustainability-focused message increases the willingness to book a room compared to a consumer service-focused message. Despite the benefits of conducting the study in a real hotel, participants were fully aware of the research taking place. Acknowledging the disruption of the real setting could make them change their behaviour either consciously or unconsciously. Similarly, [Arana and León \(2016\)](#) test whether non-market interventions can encourage tourists to choose more sustainable destinations. However, participants were fully aware of their participation, and this might alter their genuine behaviour.

Lastly, *external factors* may also affect researchers' ability to measure actual behaviour. The "limitations" section of manuscripts often gives us some evidence on the external factors that lead to researcher myopia. For instance, collaborating with businesses to conduct experiments in the field can be challenging if the intervention involves any alteration of the visitor experience ([Viglia & Dolnicar, 2020](#)). We also observe that some studies mention funding constraints as an external factor for the use of hypothetical behaviour measures. Indeed, there is a sharp increase in research costs when moving from self-reported measures to behavioural data collected via observation or field experiments. Apart from the cost-related constraint, industry practitioners are often reluctant to collaborate with researchers to set up data collection procedures in the field. Similarly, the cost of getting access to industry databases (e.g., scanner data) may deter researchers from collecting behavioural data. Considering these constraints, when there is not a possibility to conduct a field study, researchers should ensure that the study design is highly realistic.

### The four pathways for overcoming consumer hypocrisy and researcher myopia

Natural field experiments seem to be superior to other research methods given that they are conducted in a real-life context, they present high external validity, and they measure actual behaviour ([Viglia & Dolnicar, 2020](#)). However, researchers often find difficulties that deter them from conducting experiments in the field. In light of this, we want to offer some guidance to investigate behavioural phenomena in tourism. Therefore, this section develops four pathways that enable tourism researchers to overcome the two sources linked to the intention-behaviour gap (consumer hypocrisy and researcher myopia). [Fig. 1](#) represents these two pillars and sets the basis for the checklist for researchers presented in the last section.

#### Questioning the gap

In certain circumstances, tourists involuntarily create a gap between their words and deeds. Although sustainable tourists might sincerely want to behave responsibly on vacation, they are confronted with a plurality of ethical priorities that can be hardly implemented simultaneously. The literature tends to treat sustainability as a unidimensional construct ([Acuti et al., 2022](#)). However, sustainability covers different dimensions that can become priorities in parallel. For instance, tourists face daily trade-offs between trade consumption, carbon emission reduction, or sustainable waste disposal. This situation forces the sustainable tourist to decide which actions to prioritise, thus resulting in an intention-behaviour gap.

We believe that researchers can overcome the intention-behaviour gap linked to the existence of multiple ethical moralities by following three recommendations. First, instead of studying sustainable consumption in general, they could focus on the specific responsible behaviour of consumers ([Catlin et al., 2017](#)). Rather than investigating if tourists behave sustainably, they should ask: Do consumers recycle on vacation? Do they care about their emissions when travelling? Do they prefer fair trade souvenirs to traditional ones? Second, researchers should consider the coexistence of multiple ethical intentions and investigate how ethical priorities may change over time. It is key to consider how social judgements, the culture of the country where the tourist travels, or the easiness to enact a certain sustainable behaviour can change the priorities and tourists' decisions. Controlling for the dynamism of the tourists' preferences over time results in higher quality data ([Karmarkar & Bollinger, 2015](#)). Third, responsible tourists could prioritise aspects of their consumption experience that are different from the ones investigated by the researchers. In other words, responsible tourists could actually not mention their 'green priorities' because they might find them irrelevant for the interview or survey. For this reason, it is paramount - when possible - to discuss the importance of sustainable choices, if not directly addressed by the respondents.

#### Addressing the social desirability bias

Sustainable behaviour is often shaped by public observability, social norms, and social group memberships ([White et al., 2020](#)). We discussed how tourists may try to lie to themselves and wilfully disremember sustainability-related information. In such situations, highlighting the occurrence of hypocrisy, i.e., creating tourist self-awareness of it, can be effective in shifting their behaviour and replenishing the potential intention-behaviour gap. Hypocrisy salience can be used by policy makers, tourism businesses or non-governmental organisations as a strategy for undermining the wilfully ignorant memory and enhancing pro-environmental behaviour. When tourists are made aware that their behaviour is inconsistent with the beliefs they advocate, they may undertake actions to conform to socially shared norms and eliminate the unpleasant feelings of being dishonest. In other words, when they

are confronted with their hypocrisy, they seek to restore their self-integrity by aligning their behaviour with their advocacy (Gamma et al., 2020). Such effect can work also at the group level: making salient the inconsistency between what a group of consumers believes and what it does, increases a sense of responsibility and intentions to act, motivating behavioural change (Habib et al., 2021). This mechanism may motivate tourists to perform sustainable behaviours (Kim et al., 2022). For instance, emphasising the contradiction between the water conservation norm and water waste behaviours can lead them to reduce the time they spend in the shower. Hypocrisy salience has been addressed by earlier social psychology studies but research on how it can influence sustainable vacation choices is at its infancy. Investigating the existence of hypocritical behaviours in tourism, and exploring how induced hypocrisy operates, could help us in facilitating a sustainable future for tourism.

The same tourists' desire to conform to social norms and eliminate the feelings of being dishonest can negatively impact the reliability of their responses. Indeed, the social desirability of responsible consumption could make tourists report false (sustainable) intentions and behaviour. Consequently, it is key for researchers to control and reduce social desirability bias (for a thorough definition of this bias, see Fisher, 1993). First, we recommend researchers to recognise and anticipate the conditions under which the social desirability bias is especially likely to occur (Dahlgren & Hansen, 2015). For instance, the tendency to answer questions in a socially desirable way could occur when subject anonymity is compromised. Consequently, researchers should be very clear in ensuring the anonymity of data collection and analysis. Second, researchers should try to detect and measure the social desirability of the responses using social desirability validated scales (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2016). This practice enables the researcher to eliminate the responses of individuals scoring high on social desirability scales. Finally, we recommend the use of methods that help to control for the bias. For instance, the adoption of projective techniques like the implicit association test (IAT) can help to assess socially significant automatic associations without relying on the explicit biased responses of consumers (Luchs et al., 2010).

Measuring real behaviour

Measuring real behaviour of tourists is crucial to mitigate the first three factors that lead to research myopia (i.e., unambitious research goals, suboptimal measures and research invasiveness). Understanding how researchers get insight from real life behaviours can guide our recommendations in this regard. Therefore, we summarise and assess the effectiveness of a number of data collection techniques that are used by tourism researchers to gather insights into the actual behaviour of individual tourism agents (i.e., travellers, diners, and attendees). Fig. 2 organises the data collection techniques depending on their proximity to the real phenomenon in a range that goes from "distant" to "close". Distant techniques are those that collect data on constructs that differ from behaviour. Close techniques are those that measure real behaviour.

Self-reported data refers to data collected through surveys, questionnaires, interviews or focus groups, where tourism agents report their views. These techniques are useful to retrieve information on attitudes, intentions or hypothetical behaviour. One of the limitations of self-reported data is the above-mentioned social desirability bias. Other techniques to capture hypothetical behaviour are fictional data, historical data and physiological data. Fictional data encompass those behaviours that are elicited via incentives (i.e., using a monetary incentive). While more realistic than self-reported data, elicited behaviours still occur within a fictional setting. Collecting historical data (i.e., past tourist behaviour) is another technique that helps understand hypothetical behaviour. With physiological data, researchers collect data that depict tourists' physiological reactions to a certain stimulus. Those techniques are closer to the phenomenon being investigated and enable researchers to gather insights into quasi-real behaviour.

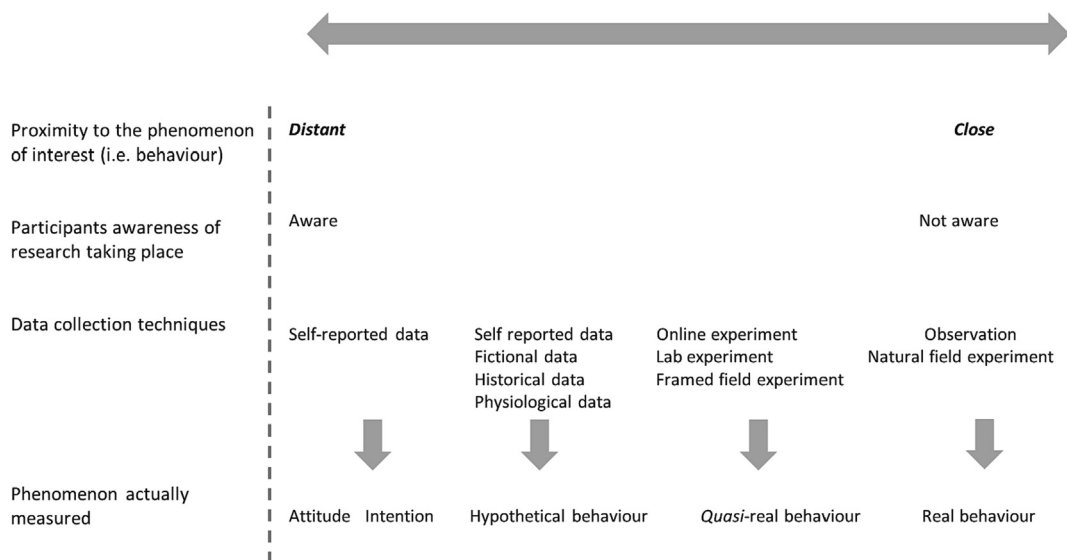


Fig. 2. Data collection techniques based on proximity to the phenomenon.



**Table 2**  
Methodological checklist for tourism researchers to better overcome the intention-behaviour gap.

Researcher angle's pathway	Methodological aspects to check	Practical actionable advice
Measure real behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Can we get access to the real service context?</li> <li>✓ How to recruit real tourism agents?</li> <li>✓ Are we using behavioural measures?</li> <li>✓ Is the dependent variable realistic?</li> <li>✓ Can we use incentives to encourage real behaviour?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recruit real agents: e.g. real visitors, real guests.</li> <li>Recreate a real service context: e.g. use disguises, handouts.</li> <li>Collaborate with small tourism industry partners.</li> <li>Invite participants to take real action: e.g. click-through behaviour, write a real review, post on their social media.</li> <li>Ask participants to: make real payments, donate part of their incentive.</li> </ul>
Design realistic experiments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Can we go beyond a survey-based experiment?</li> <li>✓ Are the stimuli realistic?</li> <li>✓ Is there any effect of situational factors?</li> <li>✓ Can we track participants' actions rather than recording responses?</li> <li>✓ Can we use artificial settings to better simulate the scenario?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use ad-hoc laboratory experiments.</li> <li>Use real websites, real reviews, physical product mock-ups, audio dialogues instead of reading.</li> <li>Capture situational factors (e.g. weather, noise, time of the day).</li> <li>Employ eye-tracking, mouse-tracking techniques, capture voice intonation or facial expressions.</li> <li>Use augmented or virtual reality.</li> </ul>

Quasi-real behaviour derives from online experiments, lab experiments and framed field experiments (i.e., field experiments where participants are aware of being part of an experiment). Nonetheless, the artificial setting makes these techniques suffer from low external validity. This is due to factors like the participants' perceptions of the artificiality of the lab or the potential unrepresentativeness of the population of interest (Goldfarb et al., 2022; Schram, 2005; Viglia et al., 2021).

The *closest representation of the phenomenon* comes from observation and natural field experiments. These techniques capture natural data. Two aspects are key here: i) the data collection takes place in the field (i.e., in the real setting where the phenomenon takes place) and ii) the agents are not aware of the research taking place. These investigations can be either qualitative or quantitative in nature. The qualitative observation of natural situations revolves around tourists' observation, e.g., through ethnography studies (Lofland et al., 2022). This offers fine-grained exploration of tourism phenomena. Quantitatively, the gold standard in this category are natural field experiments which assess causal effects. The main benefit of a natural field study is its potential to show *where* and *when* certain phenomena are likely to occur (Gneezy, 2017). Having said that, when it comes to explaining how the phenomenon takes place, i.e., the psychological mechanism behind it, natural field studies fall short given that they focus on observed behaviour. This limits the understanding of psychological processes underlying that behaviour. To investigate these underlying mechanisms, conventional laboratory experiments are superior, as they can purposefully test and analyse the potential mediating effects (Gneezy, 2017; Sarkar et al., 2022). Therefore, a combination of lab and field experiments is the optimal strategy to offer robust empirical evidence.

Given the difficulties of conducting natural field experiments, researchers often use realistic experiments either in the lab or online, as well as framed field experiments that elicit quasi-real behaviour. In those instances, experimental realism is key to deriving conclusions from studies based on non-natural experiments (Morales et al., 2017). The following section discusses this precise dimension.

### Designing realistic experiments

When external factors impede measuring real tourist behaviour, increasing the realism of the independent variables in the study is key to enhancing its external validity. Similarly, using behavioural measures as dependent variables increases the validity of a non-field study (Morales et al., 2017). In the recent years we assisted at a huge increase of the so-called survey experiments, which are experiments conducted on a survey. Researchers use survey experiments to establish causal effects in descriptively representative samples, but concerns remain regarding the strength of the stimuli and the lack of realism in experimental settings. In fact, participants may not adjust their beliefs and opinions in response to this information (see Barabas & Jerit, 2010), posing a threat to the external validity of the findings. We next discuss how to increase the realism of (i) the experimental setting, (ii) the stimuli, and (iii) the dependent variable.

The realism of the experimental *setting* can be increased by creating ad-hoc labs, where a real tourism environment is recreated either physically (e.g., shop aisles), digitally (e.g., video of a tourism attraction, exposure to social media) or virtually (e.g., a museum shop in virtual reality). Virtual reality can be used to build realistic contextual environments for investigating consumer behaviour (Xu et al., 2021). When manipulations are impractical or costly (e.g., changing hotel layout), or external factors are difficult to control and may alter the study (e.g., the behaviour of other tourists), virtual reality can be an effective tool to reproduce the actual decision-making situation (Van Herpen et al., 2016). Scholars can use mock social media tools to conduct ecologically-valid research on social media behaviour. The use of a realistic social media environment allows the researcher to collect detailed behavioural data on how participants behave on social media, such as how they interact with posts or how they respond to other users' behaviour.

Scholars can increase the realism of the *stimuli* or scenarios by using product mock-ups, fictional websites that replicate a real online environment, the exposure to real prices or price variability and the use of real pictures of the tourism experience. Some of these techniques can be implemented at a relatively low cost. For instance, rather than showing pictures of a tourism product, the

realism of the stimuli can be boosted by bringing real products into the lab (Castro et al., 2013). Researchers could also use real tourism websites or real brochures as stimuli rather than creating fictional materials (Peluso et al., 2022). The extensive pre-testing of the stimuli is a good practice to check their realism. In line with this, Zhou et al. (2019) confirm the reliability of the independent variable manipulation by (1) using different manipulations, (2) pretesting the manipulations, and (3) comparing the mean of the manipulation measure with the means of the same variable reported by other papers.

Finally, to enhance the realism of the *dependent variable*, any strategy inviting respondents to take action is more realistic than self-reported data (e.g. clicking on a link, posting on social media, making a real purchase, donating part of the incentive). For instance, Bresciani et al. (2021) asked respondents to choose among three accommodations and gave them 10 vouchers of the value of €50 based on their accommodation preference. Apart from monetary compensations, ensuring that the topic is interesting for respondents or emphasising social or ethical benefits (e.g., explaining the importance of their contribution) can strengthen their involvement with the experimental tasks (Lonati et al., 2018).

## A methodological checklist for tourism researchers

After explaining the prevalent role of the intention-behaviour gap in sustainable tourism (Table 1), we identified two groups of factors leading to this gap: consumer hypocrisy and research myopia. We discussed the best practices in investigating behavioural phenomena in tourism and retrieved academics' views on how to enhance experimental realism. Following these insights, Table 2 builds on the methodological advice by presenting a checklist for tourism researchers. This equips researchers with a tool to empirically test their models with more robust empirical packages.

## Conclusion

Despite tourists' demand for more responsible policies, practices and initiatives, sustainability is not always considered in their decision-making choices. This intention-behaviour gap has become increasingly recognized as a big challenge for tourism practitioners willing to re-focus and adapt their business towards sustainability principles. Scholars have tried to find the causes of the intention-behaviour gap and potential ways to fill such a gap, thus reconciling tourists' expressed intentions and actions (e.g. Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014; Sadiq et al., 2022). In this paper, we have provocatively questioned the existence of the gap to encourage researchers - including ourselves - to reflect on how reliable tourists' claims and behaviours are (i.e., consumer hypocrisy) and which methodologies we currently adopt to study those (i.e., researcher myopia). After reviewing the main contributions on the intention-behaviour gap in tourism published in the last 10 years, we identify the main intrinsic and extrinsic factors that generate a gap between consumer intentions and behaviour. We also emphasise how the tourism literature does not discuss the possibility of this inconsistency to be only apparent, as it is contrarily recognized in other disciplines (Caruana et al., 2016). Drawing upon the concept of consumer hypocrisy, we propose that, in some cases, there is no inconsistency between tourists' words and actions, because intentions do not exist, reported behaviours are not true, or behavioural measurements are inaccurate. Stemming from the intense publish or perish pressure in tourism (Lee & Benjamin, 2023; McKercher & Dolnicar, 2022), we have also examined a number of factors that cause researcher myopia (i.e., unambitious research goals, sub-optimal behavioural measures, research invasiveness, and external factors).

We develop four pathways to mitigate the conceptual and methodological challenges linked to the intention-behaviour gap. Particularly, we explain how the effects of consumer hypocrisy on empirical tourism studies can be reduced by shifting the focus from the intention-behaviour gap to the reconciliation of a plurality of ethical priorities and by reducing the social desirability bias. To diminish the researcher myopia, we assess data collection techniques adopted in past tourism studies considering their proximity to the phenomenon being investigated (Fig. 2). We then explain how to increase the experimental realism and reduce the distance between the measurement of the phenomenon of interest (i.e., actual behaviour) and the measured phenomenon. Finally, we advance a list of methodological recommendations to tackle researcher myopia. We provide these recommendations in the form of a checklist to encourage researchers to design empirical packages that are methodologically robust to capture real behaviour.

## Implications

This conceptual paper has important implications for tourism scholars that open for a rich research agenda. First, we synthesise tourism studies that show evidence of an intention-behaviour gap and propose the existence of internal and external factors that impede an effective translation of tourists' sustainable intentions into actions (e.g., Karlsson & Dolnicar, 2016; Wu et al., 2021). The growing scholarly attention to this inconsistency shows how we still need to find its causes and effective strategies to enhance sustainable behaviour.

Second, we put forward a novel discussion about the need to tackle consumer hypocrisy in tourist decision-making. By conceptualising consumer hypocrisy in the tourism field, we suggest that tourism scholars question the existence of the intention-behaviour gap or, at least, keep it aside from the focus of their empirical investigations. Indeed, the existence of simultaneous yet conflicting ethical priorities impedes tourists from accomplishing all their sustainability goals. Moreover, we also emphasise how research participants could lie to their interlocutor or themselves, reporting false intentions or behaviours. We believe that future studies should address how tourists prioritise - and reconcile - their sustainability actions. We also encourage further research to spot and reduce the social desirability of tourists when reporting their intentions and behaviours.

Third, we enrich tourism research knowledge on experiments by highlighting potential weaknesses of experimental designs that hamper an effective forecast of tourists' - sustainable or unsustainable - behaviour. Responding to the four main factors that lead to research myopia, we encourage researchers to define ambitious research goals, reduce participants' perception of the artificiality of the environment, and employ strong behavioural measures. Field studies - including qualitative enquiries - can address most of these aspects if carefully designed. In tourism, field experiments have effectively tested how intervention strategies can drive sustainable tourism behaviour (Demeter et al., 2023). To offer a compelling empirical package for a research question, researchers must combine field studies with conventional laboratory experiments, since the latter are superior when it comes to investigating the psychological mechanisms leading to behaviour (Gneezy, 2017). Unfortunately, the mitigation of external factors is hard, and sometimes out of the control of researchers. We invite future studies to explore which instruments or strategies could help to overcome such factors (e.g., how to reduce research costs or how to attract companies to share their data).

Finally, we provide tourism scholars with a checklist with some practical methodological recommendations to reduce the distance between what is being investigated and what is actually measured or captured. As we believe in the importance of sharing good practices to improve the quality of scientific research, we embrace the call for high quality "slow" research (see Lee & Benjamin, 2023) to increase the relevance, rigour and reliability of what we publish.

### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Marta Nieto García:** Writing – original draft, Methodology. **Diletta Acuti:** Conceptualization, Visualization. **Giampaolo Viglia:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Validation.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Acknowledgement

The authors thank Nayla Khan for help with the literature review table.

### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2023.103678>.

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