How to overcome the intention–behavior gap in sustainable tourism: tourism agenda 2030 perspective article

Giampaolo Viglia and Diletta Acuti

Abstract
Purpose – This study encourages a quantum leap knowledge encouraging tourism researchers to measure actual behavior.

Design/methodology/approach – This study enhances 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.

Findings – This study proposes a conceptual figure that shows how relative value, rationality and social desirability are the key determinants that hamper intentions in becoming behaviors.

Originality/value – This study encourages 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.

Keywords Intention, Sustainability, Behavior, Perspective article, Tourism agenda

Paper type Research paper

如何克服可持续旅游中的意图-行为差距：2030年旅游议程观点文章

摘要
目的：为了提高学者们对实现可持续发展目标的贡献，关键的问题是要了解如何减少消费者意图和行为之间的差距。

结论：我们提出了一个概念图，显示了相对价值、理性和社会期望是如何成为阻碍意图变成行为的关键因素的。

关键词：意图，行为，可持续，旅游议程，观点文章

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Cómodo superar la brecha intención-comportamiento en el turismo sostenible: Artículo de perspectiva de la agenda 2030 del turismo

Resumen
Diseño/metodología/enfoque: Para mejorar la contribución de los estudiosos a la consecución de los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible, es fundamental entender cómo se puede paliar la distancia entre las intenciones y el comportamiento de los consumidores.

Propósito: Queremos impulsar un salto en el conocimiento que anime a los investigadores del turismo a medir el comportamiento real.

Resultados: Proponemos una figura conceptual que muestra cómo el valor relativo, la racionalidad y la deseabilidad social son los determinantes clave que dificultan que las intenciones se conviertan en comportamientos.

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Originalidad/valor: Animamos a los estudiosos a tener en cuenta las percepciones de los consumidores y el valor relativo que atribuyen a la sostenibilidad en su toma de decisiones y a realizar estudios de campo que observen el comportamiento de los consumidores en el mundo real y midan no sólo las intenciones, sino lo que realmente ocurre.

Palabras clave: Intención, Comportamiento, Sostenibilidad, Agenda del turismo, Articulo de perspectiva

Tipo de papel Trabajo de investigación

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 policymakers 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 in understanding the gap between intentions and behavior that exists in sustainable tourism. The positive attitude of tourists toward sustainable products or services does not emerge as a reliable predictor of making sustainable vacation choices (Juvan and 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 toward 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 toward sustainable behavior, but often cannot translate this into a green holiday option (Shaw, 2016). This discrepancy is one of the biggest challenges for destination marketers, policymakers 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 (Agag 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, organizations need to remove the barriers that impede the development of sustainable travelers’ behavior. 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 (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 behavior or the theory of reasoned action to investigate sustainable consumption, thus assuming that consumer behavior 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 and 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 and 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 behavior 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 and 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 policymakers 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 does not 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 behaviors) and enhance the robustness of findings (Can et al., 2020).

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 and 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.

References


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About the authors

Giampaolo Viglia is Professor at the University of Portsmouth and University of Aosta Valley. His research interests lie in the areas of pricing, consumer decision-making and online reputation. Giampaolo Viglia is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: giampaolo.viglia@port.ac.uk

Diletta Acuti is senior lecturer at the University of Portsmouth. Her research interests revolve around sustainability communication and sustainable consumption studies.

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