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Can Travel Pledges Influence Tourists' Sustainable Travel Behavior?

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Executive Summary: Environmental awareness is growing, and understanding the impact of sustainability pledges on tourist behavior is crucial. This study investigates the effectiveness of such commitments in shaping eco-friendly travel choices. Through a comprehensive analysis of data collected from 475 participants, we examine the influence of sustainability pledges on environmental knowledge, tourist inspiration, and connectedness with nature. Furthermore, our findings highlight the critical role of environmental concern in shaping attitudes towards sustainability travel pledges. Practical implications from these findings offer actionable strategies for industry practitioners to promote sustainable tourism, emphasizing the integration of sustainability pledges into promotional materials, the design of inspiring nature experiences, tailored engagement strategies, and implementing practical initiatives and incentives. By fostering collaboration with local communities and conservation organizations, stakeholders can collectively contribute to advancing sustainable tourism practices, ensuring a positive impact on both the environment and the tourism industry's long-term viability.

Keywords: *Sustainable Travel, Travel Pledges, Environmental Concern, Connectedness with Nature, Tourists' Inspiration*

INTRODUCTION

The Economic Significance of the Tourism Industry

Tourism plays a central role in the global economy, contributing significantly to national and international financial landscapes. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), the US GDP benefited from the tourism sector with a forecasted contribution of approximately

\$1.1 trillion in 2022. Furthermore, this economic force is expected to grow, reaching \$1.3 trillion in 2023. This remarkable growth represents a 22.2% increase from 2021 to 2022 and an 18.2% rise from 2022 to 2023. Simultaneously, employment opportunities within the industry are projected to rise, with an estimated 17.8 million jobs in 2023, up from 16.4 million in 2022. On a global scale, the

WTTC predicts that the tourism industry will contribute approximately \$9.5 trillion worldwide GDP in 2025. Despite this impressive figure, it remains 5% below pre-pandemic levels observed in 2019.

Nevertheless, the sector is poised to support a substantial workforce, with an estimated 334 million jobs globally in 2023, reflecting a 25.3% increase compared to 2022 (WTTC, 2023; Statista, 2023).

Environmental Challenges Facing the Tourism Industry

While the tourism industry undoubtedly offers significant economic benefits, it poses considerable challenges to the environment, local communities, and host destinations (Ali, 2016; Su et al., 2024). These negative consequences include greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss, water scarcity, waste generation, cultural erosion, and social inequality (Albrecht & Raymond, 2023). For instance, the travel and tourism industry was responsible for 8% of the global carbon emissions in 2013, and this share is projected to increase to 12% by 2025 if no mitigation actions are taken (Gössling et al., 2024). The travel and tourism industry also consumes 21% of the global water resources, 14% of the global land use, and 5% of the global energy use, putting pressure on the natural resources and ecosystems that sustain life on Earth (Gössling et al., 2024).

The Call for Sustainable Tourism Practices

Recognizing the urgent need to address these environmental challenges,

prominent international bodies such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) have advocated for a heightened emphasis on the paradigm of sustainable tourism (Abreu et al., 2024). Recently, numerous destinations, including but not limited to Iceland, Finland, New Zealand, and Palau, have undertaken initiatives to promote responsible travel behaviors by instituting responsible tourism pledges. These pledges aim to raise awareness among tourists regarding the adverse ramifications of their actions and encourage sustainable behavior during their travels (Albrecht & Raymond, 2023).

The Need for the Study

Despite the growing adoption of sustainability pledges, a significant gap exists in understanding their impact on tourist behavior, particularly in promoting less conventional sustainable practices. Existing research highlights pledges' success in encouraging traditional sustainable activities such as recycling and energy conservation (Albrecht & Raymond, 2023; Chen, 2021). However, there needs to be more insight into how these pledges influence broader sustainable behaviors and inspire more profound environmental engagement among tourists. This study addresses this critical gap by examining how sustainability pledges affect tourists' environmental knowledge, inspiration, and connectedness with nature, ultimately influencing their intentions to travel sustainably.

Research Purpose, Objectives, and Questions

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of sustainability pledges on travelers' perceptions and intentions toward sustainable tourism practices. The specific objectives include:

- 1) We assess the impact of sustainability pledges on visitors' environmental knowledge, connectedness with nature, and inspiration towards sustainable travel.
- 2) We examine how visitors' environmental knowledge, connectedness with nature, and inspiration influence their intentions to engage in sustainable travel behaviors.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How does exposure to sustainability pledges influence visitors' environmental knowledge, connectedness with nature, and inspiration towards sustainable travel?
- 2) To what extent do visitors' environmental knowledge, connectedness with nature, and inspiration impact their intentions to travel sustainably?

The Significance of Findings

The findings of this study are crucial for several reasons. Firstly, they provide

empirical evidence on the effectiveness of sustainability pledges, offering actionable insights for tourism stakeholders to design and implement more impactful sustainable tourism strategies. Secondly, understanding the psychological and behavioral mechanisms underlying tourists' responses to sustainability pledges can help tailor communication and engagement strategies to foster greater environmental responsibility. Finally, promoting sustainable travel behavior is essential for mitigating the adverse environmental impacts of tourism, ensuring the industry's long-term viability, and contributing to global sustainability goals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding Sustainability Pledges in Tourism

A sustainability pledge within the tourism context refers to a voluntary, public, and explicit commitment made by travelers, businesses, or destinations to adopt and adhere to responsible and sustainable practices during travel and tourism activities (Hutchison, 2021). These pledges address the travel and tourism industry's significant environmental, social, and cultural impacts, encompassing greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss, and cultural erosion (Albrecht & Raymond, 2023).

The Role of Sustainability Pledges

The significance of sustainability pledges in tourism lies in their potential to influence and shape sustainable behaviors and practices among travelers and tourism

stakeholders (Goffi et al., 2023). They contribute to the perception of destinations as sustainable and inspire eco-friendly behaviors among travelers (Gössling, 2020). By fostering awareness, educating, and motivating travelers to adopt sustainable behaviors, sustainability pledges are crucial in enhancing destinations' sustainability performance and mitigating tourism's negative impacts on the environment, society, and culture (Raymond & Albrecht, 2021).

Benefits and Challenges

Furthermore, sustainability pledges can lead to positive outcomes for businesses and destinations, including improved reputation, cost savings, increased innovation, and better stakeholder relationships (Camilleri, 2016). However, despite their potential benefits, sustainability pledges face several challenges, such as lack of transparency, difficulty measuring impact, and the risk of greenwashing. These challenges necessitate ongoing research and evaluation to enhance their effectiveness and credibility in promoting sustainable tourism (Scott, 2021).

Hypotheses Development

Sustainability pledges implemented at tourist destinations significantly influence travelers' motivation, ultimately shaping their intentions to engage in sustainable practices. Such pledges catalyze heightened awareness regarding the paramount significance of sustainability within tourism. The presence of sustainable measures and

concerted endeavors aimed at harmonizing the facets of sustainability—namely environmental, economic, socio-cultural, and institutional dimensions—contributes substantially to the perception of a destination as inherently sustainable. Consequently, this perception inspires travelers to adopt sustainable behaviors (Goffi et al., 2023). A study by the World Tourism Organization revealed that 70% of travelers are willing to allocate a premium for experiences aligned with sustainable travel (Gössling, 2020).

Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge that the overarching quality of marketing strategies, encompassing sustainability pledges, influences destination perceptions and, subsequently, tourists' intentions to visit. This interaction, in turn, fosters the general sustainability of the destination itself (Shien et al., 2022). In practical terms, sustainability pledges serve as valuable information repositories, affording travelers insights into the sustainable practices being implemented at a given destination. This knowledge empowers travelers to make judicious and informed choices regarding both their choice of destination and their mode of travel (Zhou et al., 2024).

Additionally, these pledges elicit a sense of ethical gratification among travelers who opt to visit destinations committed to sustainability. This sense of moral alignment augments travelers' inspiration to actively partake in sustainable behaviors while on their journeys. Notably, research conducted by Sustainable Travel International has

illuminated that travelers who are cognizant of a destination's sustainability pledge are more inclined to rate the destination favorably and are more predisposed to recommend it to others (Singh et al., 2024). Considering the literature review, the following hypotheses are proposed (see Figure 1):

- H1: Sustainability pledges have a significant influence on environmental knowledge.
- H2: Sustainability pledges have a significant influence on

- connectedness with nature.
- H3: Sustainability pledges have a significant influence on tourist inspiration.
- H4: Tourists' environmental knowledge will positively impact their intentions to travel sustainably.
- H5: Tourists' connectedness with nature will positively impact their intentions to travel sustainably.
- H6: Tourists' inspiration will positively impact their intentions to travel sustainably.

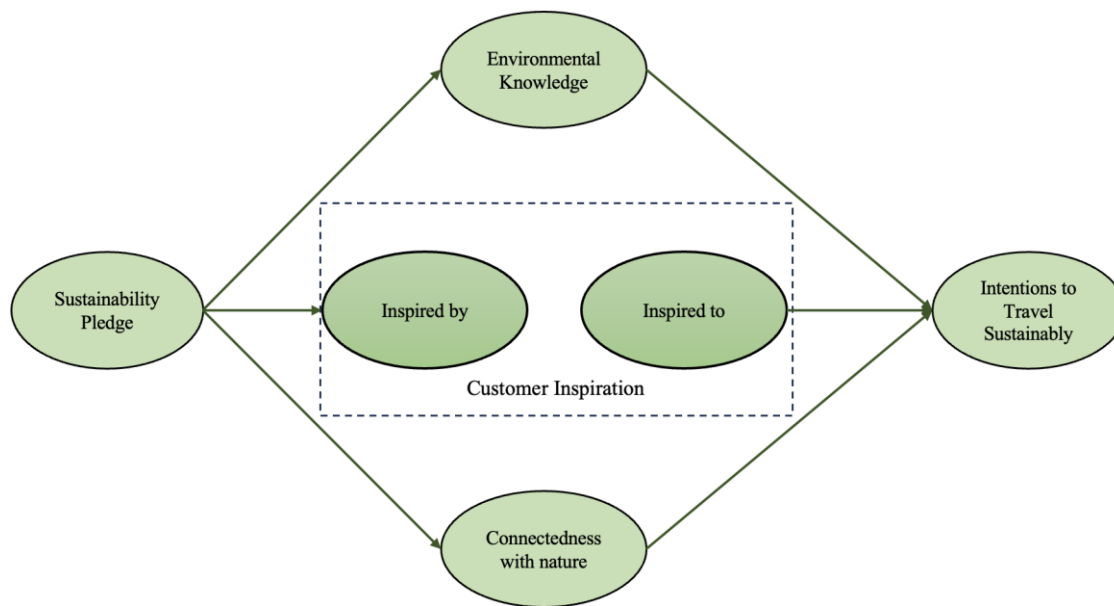


Figure 1. Research Model

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participant Recruitment and Characteristics

We recruited 475 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online platform commonly utilized by researchers to post tasks and compensate workers for completing them. The participants included

individuals over 18 years old, residing in the USA, and experienced traveling within the USA in the last 12 months. At the end of the questionnaire, demographic characteristics were collected from participants.

Instrumentation and Measurement

To assess visitors' perceptions and responses, we employed a scenario-based questionnaire of items adapted from

existing studies utilizing similar scales. First, sustainability pledge (see Figure 2). respondents were exposed to a



Figure 2: Sustainability Pledge for a Destination

The questionnaire comprised 24 items measuring four constructs:

- Customer Inspiration: Assessed using 10 items adapted from Wei et al. (2023).
- Environmental knowledge: Evaluated using 7 items adapted from Chan et al. (2014).
- Connectedness with Nature: Measured with 4 items adapted

from Apaolaza et al. (2020).

- Intentions to Travel Sustainably: Assessed using 3 items adapted from Shin and Kang (2021).

All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Before administering the questionnaire, items underwent pre-testing with a small sample of participants to ensure clarity and reliability. Data analysis was conducted using structural equation modeling (SEM) and multi-group analysis. SEM, a statistical technique, facilitated examining complex relationships among variables using multiple indicators. Multi-group analysis, a specific application of SEM, allowed for comparing responses between different participant groups.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Demographics

The demographic analysis of the 475 participants provides insightful information regarding characteristics relevant to sustainable travel behavior. Gender distribution indicated a relatively balanced representation, with 53% male and 47% female respondents. Age-wise, while the majority fell within the 25-34 age group (38%), younger age brackets, particularly those between 18-24, exhibited notable interest in sustainable travel practices. Education levels varied, with a significant proportion holding bachelor's degrees (46%), suggesting a higher likelihood of awareness and engagement with sustainability initiatives. Interestingly, income distribution showed a diverse

range, with a notable presence of lower-income respondents, potentially indicating a greater sensitivity to cost-saving measures associated with sustainable travel.

Geographically, respondents were predominantly located in urban areas (55%), where sustainable transportation options and eco-friendly accommodations may be more readily available.

Environmental Concerns and Attitudes Toward Sustainability Pledges

In assessing respondents' environmental concerns and attitudes toward sustainability pledges, we classified participants into two groups based on their responses to three questions adapted from Fuji (2006) to assess their environmental concerns. The questions included: "I think environmental problems are very important," "I think environmental problems cannot be ignored," and "I think we should care about environmental problems." Based on the answers to these questions, respondents were categorized into two groups:

- 1) Those with Higher Level of Environmental Concern (n_high = 240): Respondents who expressed a consistently high level of concern across all three environmental concern questions.
- 2) Those with Lower Level of Environmental Concern (n_low = 235): Respondents who exhibited a comparatively lower level of concern across all three

environmental concern questions.

Subsequently, both groups were asked to express their attitudes toward sustainability pledges using a 7-point semantic differential scale adapted from Lee and Kim (2020). Statistical analysis revealed a surprising discrepancy between the two groups' attitudes toward sustainability pledges. Contrary to expectations, respondents with a higher level of environmental concern exhibited a somewhat lower mean attitude score toward sustainability

pledges ($M_{high} = 4.2$, $SD_{high} = 0.6$) compared to those with lower levels of environmental concern ($M_{low} = 4.6$, $SD_{low} = 0.5$). A two-sample t-test confirmed that this difference was statistically significant ($t(473) = -2.31$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that individuals with higher environmental concern demonstrated a significantly lower attitude toward sustainability pledges compared to their counterparts with lower environmental concern (See Figure 3).

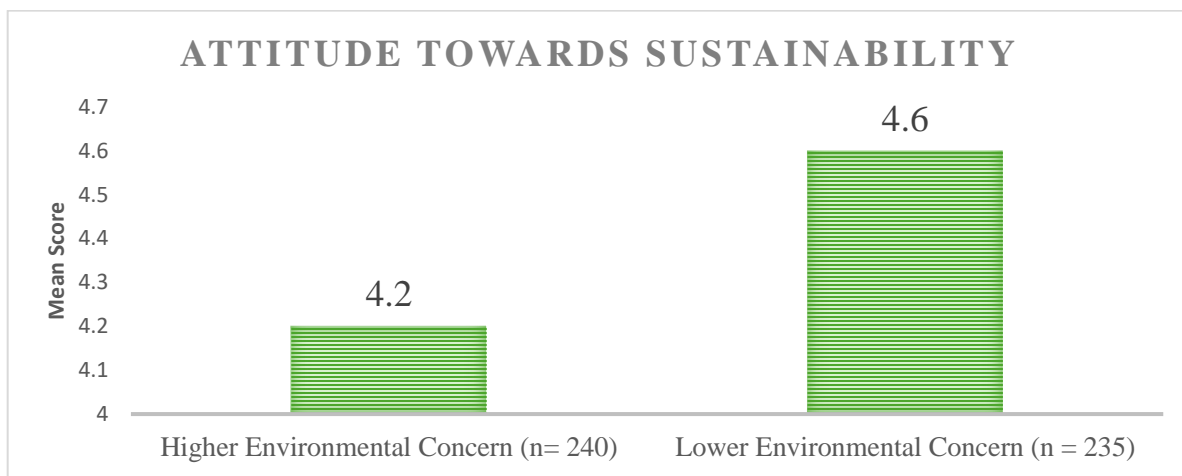


Figure 3. Environmental Concern Vs. Attitudes towards Sustainability Pledges

Confirmatory Factor Analysis – Reliability and Validity

The measurement model was rigorously evaluated to ensure the validity and reliability of the measurement scales utilized in the study. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) examined the relationships between observed variables and their respective latent constructs. The analysis revealed strong construct validity, with all

items demonstrating significant factor loadings on their intended constructs. Specifically, the sustainability pledge exhibited high factor loadings across its three items, ranging from 0.7 to 0.8. Similarly, environmental knowledge items demonstrated robust factor loadings, ranging from 0.6 to 0.75, while customer inspiration and connectedness with nature items showed loadings above 0.7 and 0.65, respectively. Intentions to travel

sustainability items exhibited factor loadings exceeding 0.75. Reliability analysis further confirmed the internal consistency of the measurement scales, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding 0.8 for sustainability pledge, environmental knowledge, customer inspiration, and intentions to travel sustainably and exceeding 0.75 for connectedness with nature. These findings underscore the validity and reliability of the measurement scales employed in the study, ensuring the robustness of subsequent analyses.

Regression Analysis

The structural model analysis, conducted through regression analysis, aimed to explain the relationships between latent constructs and test the proposed hypotheses. Regression coefficients were estimated to quantify the strength and direction of the relationships

between variables. The results revealed significant positive relationships between sustainability pledge and environmental knowledge ($\beta = 0.612$, $p < 0.001$), connectedness with nature ($\beta = 0.564$, $p < 0.001$), and tourist inspiration ($\beta = 0.411$, $p < 0.001$), confirming hypotheses H1, H2, and H3, respectively. Furthermore, environmental knowledge ($\beta = 0.301$, $p < 0.001$), tourist inspiration ($\beta = 0.443$, $p < 0.001$), and connectedness with nature ($\beta = 0.257$, $p < 0.001$) were found to exert significant positive effects on intentions to travel sustainably, supporting hypotheses H4, H5, and H6, respectively. These findings provide empirical evidence of the influential role of sustainability pledge, environmental knowledge, tourist inspiration, and connectedness with nature in shaping intentions to travel sustainably, underscoring their importance in fostering sustainable tourism behavior.

Table 1: Hypotheses Testing

No	Hypotheses	Beta	P Values	Results
H1	Sustainability Pledges -> Environmental knowledge	0.612	0.000	Supported
H2	Sustainability Pledges -> Connectedness with nature	0.564	0.000	Supported
H3	Sustainability Pledges -> Tourist inspiration	0.411	0.000	Supported
H4	Environmental knowledge -> Intentions to travel sustainably	0.301	0.000	Supported
H5	Connectedness with nature -> Intentions to travel sustainably	0.257	0.000	Supported
H6	Tourist inspiration -> Intentions to travel sustainably	0.443	0.000	Supported

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study examined the interrelationship between sustainability pledges and tourists' intentions to travel

sustainably, focusing on the underlying mechanisms driving sustainable tourism behavior. It also examined the effect of sustainability pledges on visitors'

environmental knowledge, inspiration, and connectedness to nature, leading to their intentions to travel sustainably. Data was collected from 475 respondents through a scenario-based survey.

Our findings reveal compelling insights into the relationship between sustainability pledges and tourist behavior. Consistent with previous research (Khan et al., 2024; Wei et al., 2023), our study demonstrates that sustainability pledges positively influence environmental knowledge, tourist inspiration, and connectedness with nature, corroborating the hypothesized relationships. The observed positive relationship between sustainability pledges and environmental knowledge resonates with prior studies emphasizing the educational role of sustainability initiatives in fostering greater environmental awareness among tourists (Apaolaza et al., 2020; Chan et al., 2014). By disseminating information about sustainable practices and their environmental implications, sustainability pledges serve as catalysts for enhancing tourists' understanding of environmental issues, empowering them to make more informed and sustainable travel choices.

Similarly, the significant influence of sustainability pledges on tourist inspiration echoes previous research highlighting the motivational impact of sustainability initiatives on tourist behavior (Goffi et al., 2023; Weaver, 2019). Through their aspirational messaging and emphasis on responsible travel values, sustainability pledges inspire tourists to engage in

sustainable behaviors and seek destinations that align with their ethical and environmental principles.

Furthermore, our analysis uncovered environmental knowledge, tourist inspiration, and connectedness with nature as significant predictors of intentions to travel sustainably, aligning with extant literature (Apaolaza et al., 2020; Shin & Kang, 2021). Connectedness with nature is a crucial determinant of sustainable travel intentions, consistent with the growing literature on nature-based tourism and ecotourism (Apaolaza et al., 2020). By promoting experiences that foster a sense of connection with natural environments, sustainability pledges facilitate the development of emotional attachments to destinations, motivating tourists to adopt more sustainable travel practices (Albrecht & Raymond, 2023).

Our study revealed a noteworthy finding regarding participants' environmental concerns and attitudes toward sustainability pledges. By categorizing respondents into two groups based on their level of environmental concerns and then examining their attitudes toward sustainability pledges, we uncovered a significant difference between the groups. Specifically, individuals with higher levels of environmental concern displayed a notably lower attitude toward sustainability pledges than those with lower levels. One possible explanation for this outcome could be that individuals with higher environmental concerns may hold more critical views regarding the

effectiveness or sincerity of sustainability pledges. They might perceive such pledges as insufficient or insincere attempts to address environmental issues, leading to a less favorable attitude. On the other hand, individuals with lower environmental concerns may be less sensitive to environmental issues and, therefore, more receptive to sustainability pledges, viewing them as positive initiatives without as much skepticism. This finding underscores the importance of considering individuals' levels of environmental concerns when designing and implementing sustainability initiatives, as their attitudes and responses may vary significantly based on their underlying environmental beliefs and values.

Theoretical Implications

Our study reports several noteworthy findings with significant theoretical implications. Firstly, we observe that sustainability pledges play a crucial role in shaping tourists' understanding of environmental issues, inspiring them to engage in sustainable practices, and fostering a deeper connection with nature. This suggests that sustainability pledges effectively promote environmental awareness and foster pro-environmental attitudes among tourists. These findings align with theories of environmental psychology, which emphasize the importance of environmental education and motivation in driving sustainable behavior.

Moreover, our analysis highlights the crucial role of environmental knowledge, tourist inspiration, and connectedness with

nature as critical determinants of intentions to travel sustainably. This underscores the relevance of psychological constructs such as knowledge, motivation, and emotional attachment in shaping individuals' intentions and behaviors in the context of sustainable tourism. Our findings contribute to the existing literature by explaining the relationship between these factors and their collective impact on sustainable travel intentions.

Additionally, the observed difference in attitudes toward sustainability pledges among individuals with varying levels of environmental concern sheds light on the complex interplay between individual beliefs and attitudes toward sustainability initiatives. This finding underscores the need for a detailed understanding of individual differences in environmental attitudes and perceptions, particularly in promoting sustainable tourism.

Practical Implications

Our study offers several practical insights for destinations promoting sustainability and enhancing tourists' engagement in sustainable practices. By understanding the implications of our findings, industry practitioners can develop targeted strategies and initiatives to foster sustainable tourism behavior effectively.

Sustainability pledges can serve as powerful tools for educating tourists about environmental issues. Tourism businesses and destinations should consider incorporating sustainability pledges into their promotional materials and

communication strategies to capitalize on this. By highlighting the environmental initiatives and commitments undertaken, businesses can raise awareness among tourists and inspire them to adopt more sustainable behaviors during their travels.

Tourism stakeholders can leverage our findings to design experiences that foster tourist inspiration and cultivate a deeper connection with nature. Strategies include offering eco-friendly tours and activities that immerse tourists in natural environments, providing opportunities for meaningful interactions with local ecosystems, and integrating educational components to enhance visitors' appreciation for biodiversity and conservation efforts.

Recognizing the disparity in attitudes toward sustainability pledges among individuals with different levels of environmental concern, stakeholders should adopt tailored approaches to engage diverse audience segments effectively. For tourists with higher environmental concerns, transparency and authenticity are essential. Businesses should prioritize genuine sustainability efforts and

transparent communication to build trust and credibility. Conversely, for those with lower environmental concerns, emphasizing the personal benefits of sustainable practices, such as cost savings and unique experiences, may be more effective in driving engagement.

To encourage tourists to translate their intentions into action, tourism providers can implement practical initiatives and incentives that facilitate sustainable decision-making. This may include offering eco-certified accommodations, promoting low-impact transportation options, and providing educational resources on responsible tourism practices. Additionally, implementing eco-friendly policies and initiatives within destinations, such as waste reduction programs and renewable energy initiatives, can create a supportive environment for sustainable behavior. Based on all the main findings, we list several practical strategies that can help industry practitioners implement sustainable pledges in destinations.



Figure 4: Practical Implications Based on Study Findings

- 1) Integrate sustainability pledges into promotional materials to educate tourists about environmental issues.
- 2) Design experiences that cultivate tourist inspiration and deepen their connection with nature.
- 3) Tailor approaches to engage diverse audience segments effectively based on their level of environmental concern.
- 4) Emphasize transparency and authenticity in sustainability initiatives to resonate with tourists with higher environmental concerns.
- 5) Highlight personal benefits of sustainable practices to engage tourists with lower environmental concerns.
- 6) Implement practical initiatives and incentives, such as eco-certified accommodations and low-impact transportation options, to facilitate sustainable decision-making among tourists.
- 7) Collaborate with local communities and conservation organizations to develop and promote sustainable tourism practices.

Limitations and Future Research Suggestions

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations warrant consideration. The reliance on self-reported survey data may introduce common method bias and social desirability bias,

potentially influencing the accuracy of responses. Future research endeavors should employ a mixed-method approach or utilize objective measures to mitigate these biases. Additionally, the generalizability of findings may be limited by the sample composition, which predominantly comprises online survey respondents. Future studies could adopt a stratified sampling approach to ensure greater representativeness across diverse demographic groups and travel contexts. Furthermore, longitudinal investigations could provide valuable insights into sustainability interventions' long-term efficacy and sustainability. Exploring the moderating effects of contextual factors such as destination characteristics, cultural differences, and travel motivations could offer nuanced insights into the effectiveness of sustainability initiatives across diverse tourism contexts.

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