

# An Innovative Lens on Green Tourism: A Narrative Review of Cognitive Dissonance in Sustainable Tourism Development

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Despite growing concern over sustainability, value–behaviour inconsistencies remain widespread in tourism, highlighting a need for conceptual clarity. Therefore, an inductive thematic synthesis was utilized to analyse how cognitive dissonance is conceptualized, triggered, and resolved across various green tourism contexts. Three thematic main strands emerged: (1) value–behaviour inconsistency, (2) green identity and group influence, and (3) situational constraints and greenwashing. Tourists often maintain a green self-image despite contradictory behaviour, influenced by group norms, destination cues, and infrastructural limitations. The findings highlight that destination managers and marketers must reduce behavioural friction and ensure that sustainability claims are authentic and actionable. Theoretically, the review contributes a conceptual map of cognitive dissonance in green tourism, highlighting how dissonance emerges and is managed.

*Keywords* cognitive dissonance, green tourism, sustainable tourist behaviour, value–behaviour gap, pro-environmental travel



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## Introduction

### The Relevance of Cognitive Dissonance

As global tourism continues to contribute significantly to carbon emissions, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion, the role of individual tourist behaviour has gained increasing attention (Han, 2021). Consequently, the imperative to align tourism development with sustainability principles has become a central concern for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike (Khater et al., 2024). Numerous recent studies suggest that a growing segment of tourists express pro-environmental values and attitudes, ranging from climate concern to biodiversity preservation and cultural sensitivity (Davari et al., 2024; Forleo & Bredice, 2025; Demirović Bajrami et al., 2025). Despite this attitudinal shift, a persistent gap remains between what tourists say they value and how they actually behave while

traveling—a phenomenon that poses both theoretical and practical challenges for advancing sustainability in tourism (Nieto-García et al., 2024; Seyfi et al., 2025).

This gap between intention and behaviour is often conceptualized through the lens of cognitive dissonance, a psychological theory introduced by Festinger (1957, p. 1082), which describes ‘the discomfort individuals experience when their beliefs and actions are misaligned’. In the context of green tourism, this dissonance may arise when tourists who value sustainability choose high-carbon transport, patronize unsustainable accommodations, or engage in environmentally damaging activities (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2017; see also Table 1). Instead of modifying behaviour, individuals often resort to rationalizations or psychological coping mechanisms, such as denial, moral licensing, or displacement of responsibility, to

restore internal consistency (Jorgensen & Reichenberger, 2023). These patterns are of particular interest in tourism, where temporary disinhibition, hedonistic motives, and the framing of travel as a reward or escape may further reinforce value-behaviour contradictions (Crompton, 2025).

#### Conceptual Fragmentation and Research Gaps

Despite its growing relevance, the application of cognitive dissonance theory in tourism remains conceptually diffuse. In this review, cognitive dissonance is conceptualized as a multidimensional psychological construct that combines cognitive inconsistency (between beliefs and actions) with the emotional discomfort that such inconsistency produces. While behavioural manifestations are considered as outcomes of this process, the emphasis lies on the cognitive and affective mechanisms through which tourists experience and resolve dissonance in sustainability-related contexts. This framing allows the review to capture both the mental negotiation of inconsistency and the resulting shifts in perception or justification. Although scholars have increasingly acknowledged the importance of psychological mechanisms in sustainable tourism, the concept of cognitive dissonance remains under-theorized and inconsistently applied within tourism literature (Schrems & Upham, 2020; Bhartiya et al., 2025; So et al., 2025).

For instance, while some studies conceptualize dissonance primarily as a cognitive conflict between beliefs and actions (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014), others emphasize its emotional component, framing it as an affective discomfort that motivates justification or de-

nial (Becken, 2007; Higham et al., 2013). Still others approach dissonance behaviourally, using it to explain observable inconsistencies between tourists' stated values and actions (De Vos & Singleton, 2020). This conceptual diversity has led to fragmented interpretations and methodological inconsistency, making it difficult to compare findings or build cumulative theoretical knowledge. Clarifying these distinctions is therefore essential for developing actionable insights and coherent frameworks for sustainable tourism behaviour. Fragmented across disciplines, existing studies employ varied conceptualizations and methodologies, limiting the potential for cumulative knowledge building (So et al., 2025).

Furthermore, few studies have systematically examined how tourists navigate this dissonance, what strategies they adopt to reduce it, or how destination marketing and policy environments may exacerbate or mitigate it (Han, 2021). This lack of synthesis hinders the development of robust theoretical frameworks and evidence-based interventions capable of closing the gap between green intentions and tourism practices. The fragmented application of cognitive dissonance theory in tourism not only limits theoretical advancement but also constrains practical strategies for promoting sustainable behaviour. Without a clearer understanding of how dissonance operates across contexts, efforts to design effective interventions risk remaining superficial—focused on awareness rather than behavioural alignment. Addressing these gaps is therefore crucial to advancing both theoretical rigor and actionable sustainability practices in tourism.

*Table 1* A Summary of Key Definitions of Cognitive Dissonance from Literature

Author(s)	Definition
Juvan and Dolnicar (2014)	'A psychological discomfort tourists feel when their travel behaviors conflict with their environmental values.' (p. 81)
Higham et al. (2013)	'The mental tension arising when tourists recognize that their actions contradict their pro-environmental self-image.' (pp. 952–953)
Becken (2007)	'Dissonant state tourists attempt to reduce by justifying or rationalizing their unsustainable travel behaviors.' (pp. 358–359)
De Vos and Singleton (2020)	'A mismatch between travel-related beliefs and actual journeys [...] creates dissonance that may be resolved through attitude adjustment or behavior change.' (p. 528)

To address these issues, this article presents a narrative review of the literature on cognitive dissonance in green tourism. Narrative reviews offer a flexible yet rigorous approach to synthesizing diverse bodies of knowledge, particularly in fields characterized by conceptual ambiguity and disciplinary fragmentation (Ferrari, 2015). Drawing on sources from tourism studies, environmental psychology and consumer behaviour, this review identifies key themes, theoretical tensions, and dissonance-reduction mechanisms evident in the current literature. This review advances the field in several ways. Theoretically, it offers an integrative framework that maps how cognitive dissonance is experienced and managed by eco-conscious tourists across different decision-making stages. It also highlights the interplay between individual agency and structural influences, such as marketing narratives, social norms, and infrastructural constraints, in shaping dissonant behaviour. Practically, the review provides insights for destination managers, policymakers, and sustainability educators on how to design more effective behavioural interventions, communication strategies, and policy tools that move beyond awareness-raising toward meaningful behaviour change.

#### Purpose and Theoretical Positioning of the Review

Unlike earlier reviews that have primarily examined sustainable tourism through behavioural models or attitude–intention frameworks (e.g. Han, 2021; Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014), this study focuses explicitly on cognitive dissonance as a unifying theoretical lens. Previous conceptual works have tended to address pro-environmental behaviour in general terms, without systematically mapping how psychological tension, identity processes, and contextual constraints interact to shape tourist decision-making. By synthesizing insights across tourism, psychology, and consumer behaviour, this review provides a more integrative perspective that explains not only the presence of value–behaviour gaps but also the mechanisms through which tourists manage them.

Cognitive dissonance theory also intersects with other key frameworks used to explain sustainable tourist behaviour. For instance, while the theory of

planned behaviour emphasizes rational intention formation, cognitive dissonance highlights the post-decisional tension that arises when actions diverge from intentions. Similarly, the moral disengagement framework (Jorgensen & Reichenberger, 2023) explains the psychological mechanisms individuals use to justify unethical or unsustainable actions; these mechanisms can be understood as strategies to alleviate dissonance. Therefore, rather than competing explanations, these theories are complementary, collectively offering a more comprehensive understanding of the cognitive and moral processes shaping (un)sustainable behaviour in tourism.

In sum, the overarching aim of this review is to explore how cognitive dissonance has been conceptualized and addressed within the context of sustainable tourism behaviour. Specifically, the objectives are threefold: (1) to map and synthesize how the concept of cognitive dissonance has been applied in tourism and sustainability literature; (2) to identify common themes, theoretical perspectives, and dissonance-reduction mechanisms related to eco-conscious tourists; and (3) to highlight key gaps and offer directions for future research and policy development. Therefore, this review builds a critical foundation for rethinking the role of cognitive dissonance in sustainable tourism and proposes a future research agenda that bridges psychological theory and policy innovation. By doing so, it supports the broader ambition of aligning tourism practice with the values it increasingly professes.

#### Methodology

This study adopts a narrative review methodology to synthesize and critically analyse the existing literature on cognitive dissonance in green tourism. A narrative review was deemed suitable due to the interdisciplinary and evolving nature of the topic (Ferrari, 2015), which intersects tourism studies, insights from environmental science, and consumer behaviour. Unlike systematic reviews that focus on quantifying findings through meta-analytical approaches, narrative reviews allow for conceptual exploration, theoretical integration, and interpretive flexibility (Mura & Sharif, 2017; Greenhalgh et al., 2018). This approach is particularly useful for uncovering inconsistencies,

emergent themes, and underexplored connections in fragmented bodies of literature (Mainil & Platenkamp, 2010). Compared with integrative or scoping reviews, this approach was deemed most appropriate as it enables critical interpretation and theoretical synthesis rather than mapping or descriptive aggregation, aligning with the study’s aim to conceptualize how cognitive dissonance operates in green tourism.

To identify relevant literature, a structured search was conducted across four academic databases: Web of Science Core Collection, Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. The search was carried out in July 2025 and included literature published up to that point. A combination of Boolean operators and wildcards was used to retrieve articles across three conceptual domains: cognitive dissonance, tourism behaviour, and sustainability. An illustrative search string used in Scopus was: (“cognitive dissonance”) AND (“touris\*” OR “travel\*”) AND (“sustainable” OR “eco-tourism” OR “green behavior”), as summarized in Table 2.

Search results were restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles written in English. While studies published in 2015 or later were eligible for inclusion, pri-

ority was given to those published within the past five years. A total of 572 records were identified, and 482 were retained after removing duplicates (Figure 1). Titles and abstracts, and where necessary the full text, were screened and assessed to eliminate clearly irrelevant papers. Inclusion criteria required that studies engaged with the concept of cognitive dissonance (either explicitly or implicitly) and focused on tourism or travel behaviour in relation to sustainability. Articles were excluded if they lacked direct relevance to tourism, addressed sustainability without engaging dissonance-related constructs, or were limited to purely descriptive reporting. Editorials, conference abstracts, and non-peer-reviewed literature were also excluded from consideration. Themes were identified inductively and refined iteratively during the synthesis process. Recurring patterns were grouped into broader categories. This analysis informed a conceptual map that synthesizes the thematic strands of cognitive dissonance in green tourism, illustrating how dissonance arises and is addressed across diverse contexts (Figure 4). Although the narrative review approach does not follow rigid protocols such as PRISMA, several steps were taken to enhance transparency and minimize

Table 2 A Summary of the Search Strategy, Inclusion Criteria, and Review Parameters Used in this Narrative Review

Item	Description
Review type	Narrative review
Databases searched	Web of Science Core Collection, Scopus, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar
Search period	July 2025
Example strings	“cognitive dissonance”, “value-behaviour gap”, “green hypocrisy”, “touris*”, “eco-tourism”, “sustainable travel”, “pro-environmental behaviour”
Language restrictions	English only
Publication year range	2015–2025
Inclusion criteria	address cognitive dissonance relate to sustainability in tourism or travel provide theoretical, empirical, or conceptual insights into value-behaviour inconsistencies
Exclusion criteria	irrelevant to tourism no engagement with dissonance-related constructs purely descriptive non-peer-reviewed editorials or conference abstracts

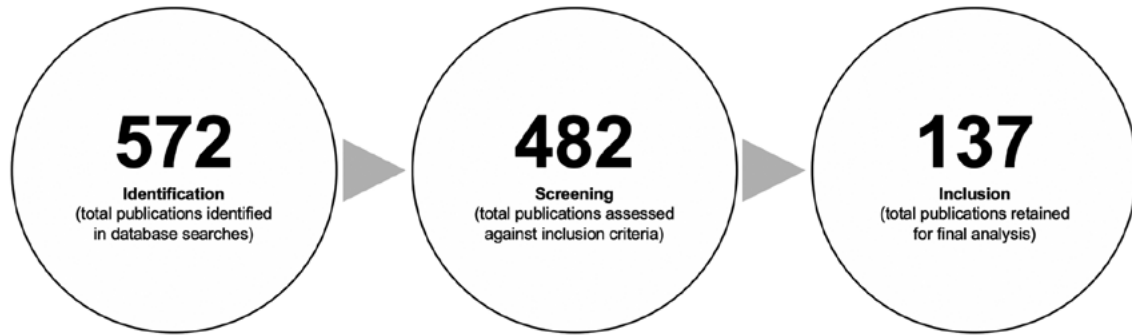


Figure 1 The Article Selection Process Across Identification, Screening, and Inclusion Stages

selection bias. These include maintaining a log of the screening and documenting the coding framework used for thematic categorization to ensure transparency and analytical consistency.

**Results**

A total of 137 reviewed publications on cognitive dissonance in the context of sustainable or pro-environmental tourism were included in this narrative review. All selected studies focused primarily on tourism behaviour, with theoretical and empirical contributions rooted in tourism research and complemented by adjacent insights from environmental science and consumer behaviour. A review of the publication timeline

reveals a clear increase in scholarly attention to the topic. As illustrated in Figure 2, the cumulative number of relevant publications grew steadily between 2015 and 2025, with the 2025 figure representing a partial count since the database search was conducted in July 2025, yet still suggesting continued upward momentum. This trend reflects a growing recognition of the value-behaviour gap in sustainable tourism and the theoretical utility of cognitive dissonance as a lens through which to examine it.

The articles in this review span a diverse range of regional contexts. Figure 3 provides a summary of the geographical distribution of the studies, highlighting the dominance of research conducted in Europe,

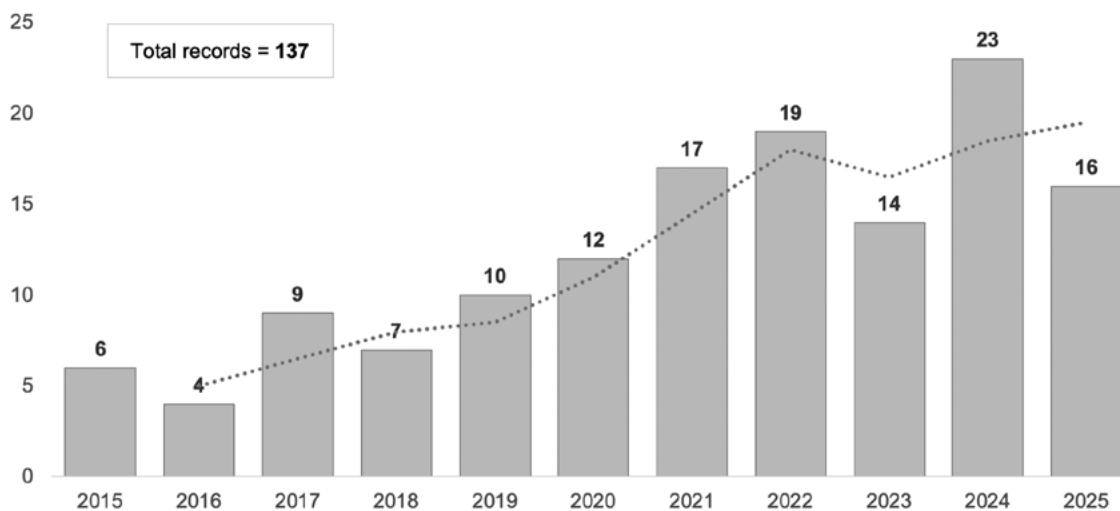


Figure 2 Cumulative number of relevant publications from 2015 to 2025 (Source: Author)

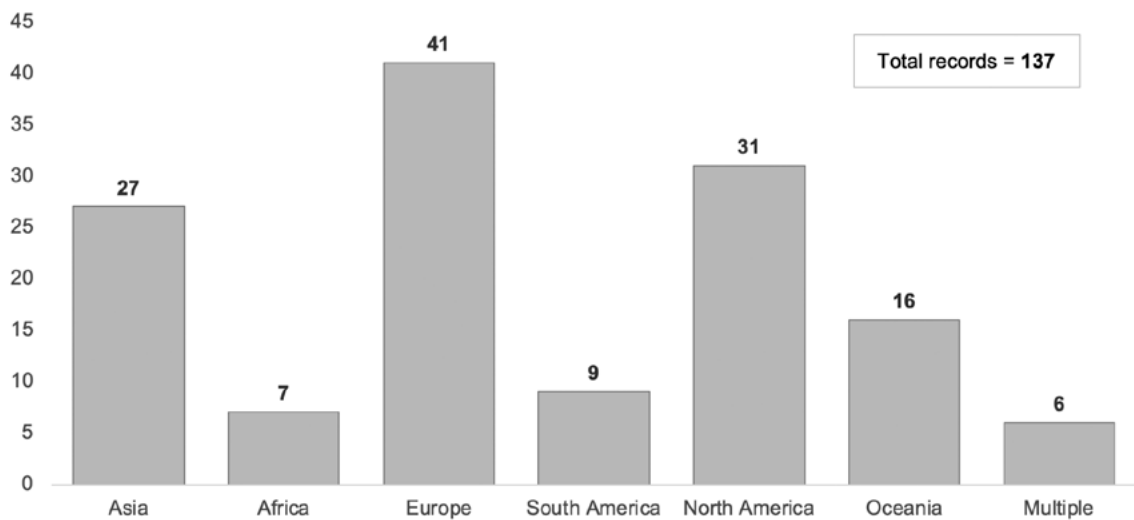


Figure 3 A Geographical Summary Outlining the Distribution of Studies by Continent

Asia, and North America, with fewer studies emerging from Africa and South America. This geographical imbalance is itself indicative of potential gaps in the global understanding of dissonance experiences across varied tourism cultures and infrastructures.

The identification of the three strands was guided by the frequency, conceptual depth and theoretical relevance of recurring themes across the reviewed studies. These strands were selected because they collectively capture the psychological (value–behaviour inconsistency), social (green identity and group influence), and structural (situational constraints and greenwashing) dimensions through which cognitive dissonance manifests in tourism contexts.

Through thematic synthesis of the literature, three overarching strands were identified, offering a structured account of how cognitive dissonance is conceptualized, triggered, and resolved in green tourism contexts (Figure 4). These three major strands are:

1. Value–behaviour inconsistency (e.g. action–attitude gap)
2. Green identity, self-perception and influence of group behaviour
3. Situational constraints and destination-level greenwashing

In the sections that follow, each of the three strands is elaborated upon to examine how tourists experience, negotiate, and resolve dissonance between their environmental values and travel-related behaviours. Each strand presents representative findings, theoretical insights, and critical reflections intended to inform future research and support the development of practical interventions.

#### Strand 1: Value–behaviour Inconsistency (e.g. action–attitude gap)

Value–behaviour gaps captures the core paradox at the heart of green tourism: the disjuncture between what tourists say they value and how they behave while travelling (Nieto-García et al., 2024). Often framed as the intention–behaviour gap (Viglia & Acuti, 2023) or action–attitude gap (Fuchs & Konar, 2025), this inconsistency reflects a fundamental manifestation of cognitive dissonance. Tourists may express strong environmental concerns, such as the importance of reducing emissions or protecting biodiversity, yet engage in behaviours that contradict those concerns (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2017).

Numerous studies have documented the inconsistency between tourists’ environmental values and their actual travel behaviour. Peluso et al. (2021), for

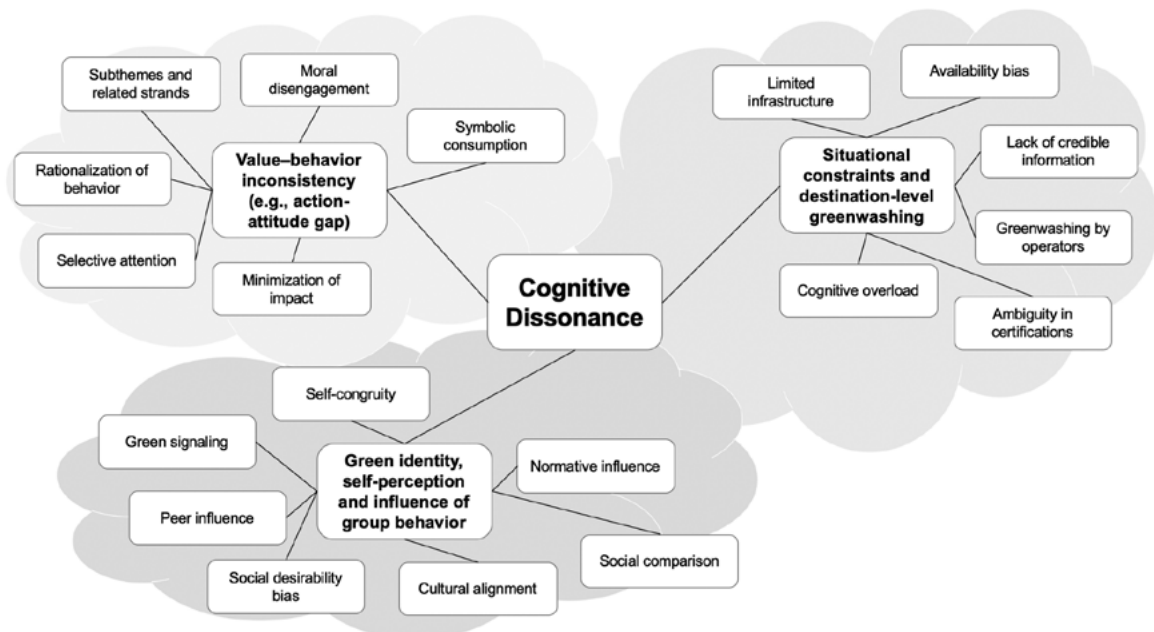


Figure 4 A Conceptual Map Synthesizing the Main Thematic Strands of Cognitive Dissonance in Green Tourism

instance, found that although European tourists who expressed strong environmental concern also reported high behavioural intentions, these intentions weakened significantly when real-world constraints such as price and time pressure were introduced. This illustrates how situational factors can create a dissonance between values and actions. Similarly, Nieto-García et al. (2024) argue that tourists often experience a conflict between their sustainability values and the desire for comfort, pleasure, or convenience during holidays—leading to behavioural inconsistency even among highly motivated individuals.

This value-behaviour gap is further exacerbated by what Viglia and Acuti (2023) call ‘behavioural friction’, including poorly designed booking systems and limited access to sustainability information, which obstruct tourists from aligning behaviour with intention. Fuchs and Konar (2025) highlight another form of dissonance: tourists in nature-based destinations frequently shift responsibility for sustainability to local stakeholders, distancing themselves from the implications of their own behaviour. Juvan and Dolnicar (2017) add that not all pro-environmental tourists behave the same way; among over 3,000 respondents,

they found that general green attitudes had little predictive power without situational alignment or intrinsic motivation.

Collectively, these findings highlight the persistent gap between what tourists say they value and how they act, making value-behaviour inconsistency a critical point of intervention for sustainable tourism development. Moreover, several studies emphasize that tourists often employ psychological rationalizations—such as denial, moral licensing, or displacement of responsibility—to reconcile the inconsistency between their environmental values and actual behaviour (Jorgensen & Reichenberger, 2023). These coping mechanisms are frequently intertwined with hedonistic motives and the temporary sense of disinhibition that travel affords, allowing individuals to justify unsustainable choices as deserved exceptions or harmless indulgences (Crompton, 2025).

#### Strand 2: Green Identity, Self-perception and Influence of Group Behaviour

Green identity and self-perception emerged as key dimensions in understanding how tourists rationalize or reconcile inconsistencies between their environ-

mental values and travel-related behaviours. Across multiple studies, individuals who self-identify as environmentally responsible consistently report stronger pro-environmental intentions (Bilynets & Cvelbar, 2022; Agyeiwaah et al., 2023; Choi & Kim, 2024). However, this identity is not always sufficient to produce congruent actions while travelling. For example, Bilynets and Cvelbar (2022) found that although tourists with pro-environmental daily habits were more likely to act sustainably while travelling, the perceived environmental image of the destination significantly influenced behavioural outcomes. Interestingly, only 26% of respondents who self-identified as environmentally conscious reported consistent pro-environmental behaviour across both daily life and travel contexts (Bilynets and Cvelbar, 2022).

Tourists were more likely to engage in eco-friendly actions when the destination was perceived as environmentally responsible, suggesting that destination image interacts with tourists' self-concept to either reinforce or suppress pro-environmental intentions (Lee et al., 2025; Song et al., 2025). Similarly, Choi and Kim (2024) investigated the role of restorative natural environments in shaping hikers' environmental behaviours. They found that perceived restorativeness (i.e. the ability of an environment to promote recovery from mental fatigue and stress, and to improve overall well-being) significantly enhanced environmental self-identity, which in turn predicted pro-environmental behaviour on nature trails. Choi and Kim (2024) also highlighted that self-perception alone is insufficient without emotional and contextual reinforcement, in line with similar studies (Linder et al., 2022; Sun, 2025).

Social identity was another moderator identified in the literature (Confente & Scarpi, 2021; Davari et al., 2024). For example, Agyeiwaah et al. (2023) recognized that tourists who identified strongly with environmentally responsible peer groups were more likely to engage in sustainable practices such as waste separation, water conservation, and ethical consumption. Their study found that social identity explained over 40% of the variance in sustainable behaviour, supporting the idea that self-perception is not only individually constructed but also socially reinforced

through group affiliation and norms (Agyeiwaah et al., 2023).

Taken together, the evidence suggests that green identity and self-perception exert influence only when reinforced by situational factors and social context, indicating that fostering behavioural alignment in tourism requires more than individual motivation—it demands supportive environments and group-level engagement.

### Strand 3: Situational Constraints and Destination-level Greenwashing

Situational constraints and destination-level greenwashing have been widely recognized as external barriers that undermine tourists' ability and willingness to act in accordance with their pro-environmental values. Across the reviewed literature, situational barriers such as lack of recycling infrastructure (Díaz-Meneses et al., 2020), limited availability of sustainable transport (Peeters et al., 2019), or poor access to environmentally friendly options (Dolnicar et al., 2019) often disrupted the translation of intention into action (Nieto-García et al., 2024). For instance, several studies revealed that when tourists encountered logistical or service-level barriers, such as the absence of visible waste bins or confusing signage, they were significantly less likely to engage in recycling, energy conservation, or other sustainable behaviours (Dolnicar & Demeter, 2024; Sajid et al., 2024).

These constraints are not necessarily due to tourists' unwillingness to act sustainably, but rather to the unavailability or inconvenience of sustainable alternatives in tourism settings. In parallel, destination-level greenwashing emerged as a particularly concerning structural factor that erodes trust and creates confusion among well-intentioned tourists (Papagiannakis et al., 2024; Alyahia et al., 2024). Greenwashing refers to the practice of making exaggerated or misleading claims about the environmental performance of products, services, or destinations (Papagiannakis et al., 2024). Studies have shown that tourists are increasingly aware of greenwashing and that perceived authenticity of sustainability efforts is a critical factor in determining behavioural responses (Font et al., 2025).

For example, Montgomery et al. (2024) found that tourists exposed to vague or inconsistent sustainability claims by hotels were significantly less likely to participate in in-destination green programmes, even when those programmes were offered free of charge. Similarly, Garcia and Vargas (2024) demonstrated that when sustainability claims are not substantiated by tangible evidence—such as third-party certifications or on-site practices—tourists often disengage, viewing such initiatives as marketing ploys rather than authentic efforts.

The combination of situational barriers and destination-level greenwashing contributes to a structural disconnect between tourist intentions and actual behaviour. These findings reinforce the need for more transparent, verifiable sustainability practices at the destination level and for addressing infrastructural deficits that inhibit sustainable action. Taken together, the findings indicate that identity reinforcement and situational constraints jointly shape the intensity and resolution of cognitive dissonance in tourism contexts. When tourists' environmental self-identity is supported by visible destination cues and social norms, dissonance tends to decrease, as behavioural alignment becomes easier and socially rewarded. Conversely, when external restrictions—such as limited sustainable options or misleading greenwashing practices—undermine tourists' ability to act consistently with their values, dissonance intensifies. This interaction highlights that both internal (identity-driven) and external (contextual) mechanisms operate simultaneously, suggesting that dissonance in green tourism is best understood as a dynamic process of negotiation between self-concept and situational affordances.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The three thematic strands identified in this review—value-behaviour inconsistency, green identity and group influence, and situational constraints, including destination-level greenwashing—should not be viewed as isolated phenomena. Rather, they form an integrated and dynamic framework that illustrates how cognitive dissonance unfolds in tourism contexts (De Vos & Singleton, 2020). Value-behaviour incon-

sistency represents the core psychological tension, while green identity and group norms shape the social context in which this tension is interpreted and negotiated. Situational constraints and greenwashing, in turn, define the structural boundaries that can either exacerbate or alleviate this dissonance. Together, these interconnected dimensions provide a holistic understanding of how individual cognition, social influence, and environmental structure jointly shape (and sometimes perpetuate) inconsistencies in sustainable tourist behaviour.

The synthesis of the reviewed literature emphasizes that value-behaviour inconsistency is widespread and multifaceted (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014; Fuchs & Konar, 2025). Tourists often hold genuine environmental values but face psychological, social, and structural challenges that prevent those values from consistently guiding behaviour. This inconsistency is central to understanding the limits of individual sustainability efforts in tourism and underscores the relevance of cognitive dissonance as a theoretical lens in this domain. The three strands identified (value-behaviour inconsistency, green identity and group influence, and situational constraints including destination-level greenwashing) collectively illustrate that tourist dissonance is neither purely internal nor solely context-driven. Instead, it emerges through a dynamic interplay between individual belief systems and the environments in which tourism takes place (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2017; Nieto-García et al., 2024; Crompton, 2025).

Value-behaviour inconsistency remains the most salient expression of dissonance (Nieto-García et al., 2024). Tourists frequently experience discomfort when engaging in behaviours that contradict their self-professed environmental values. However, this dissonance is not uniformly resolved. Many individuals rely on psychological mechanisms such as denial, moral licensing, or responsibility-shifting to protect their self-image (Becken, 2007; Jorgensen & Reichenberger, 2023). These coping strategies are often reinforced by broader contextual cues, such as normative group behaviour, destination branding, or the symbolic performance of sustainability (Han, 2021; Font et al., 2025), which shape how tourists perceive the legitimacy or necessity of their actions.

Furthermore, the review highlights a pronounced geographical imbalance, with most studies originating from Europe, Asia, and North America. This concentration limits the theoretical generalizability of existing models of cognitive dissonance, as they are largely grounded in sociocultural and infrastructural contexts of developed regions. From a policy standpoint, it also restricts the practical transferability of sustainability interventions to destinations in the Global South, where tourism structures, governance systems, and value frameworks differ markedly. Addressing this imbalance is essential for developing more inclusive theories and policy strategies that reflect the diversity of global tourism experiences.

The second and third strands further complicate this picture. While green identity can motivate sustainable behaviour (Bilynets & Cvelbar, 2022), it is often context-contingent, influenced by group norms and destination cues (Agyeiwaah et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2025). Similarly, situational constraints and greenwashing create external barriers that erode tourists' capacity or willingness to act consistently with their values (Papagiannakis et al. 2024; Dolnicar & Demeter, 2024). These insights highlight that dissonance in tourism is not simply a cognitive conflict to be resolved by better awareness or education. Rather, it is a socially and structurally embedded phenomenon that requires both individual and systemic responses (Dolnicar et al., 2019; Montgomery et al., 2024).

### Theoretical Implications

The findings of this review carry several implications for theory development within tourism and consumer behaviour research. First, the application of cognitive dissonance theory to tourism behaviour offers a valuable psychological complement to existing intention-behaviour models (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014; Nieto-García et al., 2024). It shifts the focus from why pro-environmental behaviour is lacking to how individuals reconcile such discrepancies internally and behaviourally (Higham et al., 2013). This shift enables more nuanced theorizing around the emotional and cognitive struggles tourists face in sustainability decision-making.

Second, the review highlights the need for theoretical integration across disciplines. Research on green tourism has often isolated psychological, social, and structural determinants of behaviour. The current synthesis suggests that such boundaries are artificial and limiting (Han, 2021). For instance, tourists' dissonance-reduction strategies are influenced not only by personal values but also by destination image, social identity, and infrastructural support (Agyeiwaah et al., 2023; Dolnicar et al., 2019). The integration of cognitive dissonance theory with social identity theory, norm activation theory, or value-belief-norm theory (Confente & Scarpi, 2021) may thus yield more holistic models capable of capturing the complexity of sustainable tourist behaviour.

Third, the analysis challenges the assumption that dissonance always results in positive behaviour change. While classic dissonance theory posits that inconsistency leads to a motivational state aimed at reducing discomfort (Festinger, 1957), the evidence suggests that many tourists resolve dissonance not by altering behaviour but by adapting their perceptions or rationalizations (Becken, 2007; Jorgensen & Reichenberger, 2023). This has profound implications for the design of interventions, suggesting that simply increasing awareness or promoting green values may not be sufficient (Dolnicar & Demeter, 2024) without altering the contextual conditions that enable sustainable behaviour.

### Managerial Implications

From a managerial and policy standpoint, the findings offer several actionable insights for destination managers, tourism marketers, and sustainability educators. One key implication is the importance of minimizing behavioural friction. Even motivated tourists may abandon pro-environmental intentions when they encounter logistical or cognitive obstacles (Peluso et al., 2021; Dolnicar et al., 2019). Enhancing the visibility, accessibility, and ease-of-use of sustainable options, such as public transport, recycling infrastructure, or eco-certified services, can help close the intention-action gap (Peeters et al., 2019). For instance, destinations can provide real-time public transport apps that integrate ticketing and route planning (Tung et

al., 2020), ensure that recycling bins are color-coded (Fuchs & Konar, 2025) and placed in high-traffic tourist areas, and display certification logos or energy-use indicators prominently within accommodation booking platforms (Bilynets et al., 2023). These practical measures reduce cognitive and logistical barriers, translating sustainability from abstract awareness into tangible, convenient choices for visitors. Second, the findings caution against superficial or symbolic sustainability messaging. Greenwashing not only fails to inspire genuine behavioural change but may actively foster distrust and disengagement among tourists (Papagiannakis et al., 2024; Montgomery et al., 2024). Destinations must move beyond vague environmental claims and provide transparent, verifiable indicators of sustainability (Font et al., 2025), ideally supported by third-party certifications and on-site cues. Authenticity in communication plays a vital role in shaping tourists' willingness to act sustainably.

Third, the influence of group norms and identity signalling suggests that social mechanisms can be powerful tools for change (Confente & Scarpi, 2021; Agyeiwaah et al., 2023). Destinations can harness this by embedding sustainability into the tourist experience in visible and socially rewarding ways—for example, through gamified sustainability challenges, community-based tourism initiatives, or visible participation in green programmes (Song et al., 2025). In practice, such gamified sustainability challenges can take the form of point-based systems or digital badges that reward tourists for engaging in eco-friendly actions—such as using public transport, reducing waste, or supporting local conservation projects (Negruşa et al., 2015; Pasca et al., 2021). These challenges can be integrated into destination apps or loyalty programmes, enabling visitors to track their progress and compare achievements with others, thereby reinforcing pro-environmental behaviour through enjoyment and social recognition (Kaakandikar et al., 2025). These strategies can activate social identity and reinforce environmentally responsible behaviour as the normative, desirable choice. Finally, the review underscores that sustainable behaviour in tourism cannot be isolated from its broader structural conditions. Policymakers should support regulatory frameworks that reduce

barriers to sustainable consumption, incentivize industry compliance, and standardize sustainability communication (Han, 2021; Khater et al., 2024). In this regard, addressing cognitive dissonance is not merely a matter of influencing tourist psychology but transforming the tourism system itself to align with pro-environmental values (Seyfi et al., 2025).

### **Conclusion and Future Research**

This narrative review has examined how cognitive dissonance theory can deepen our understanding of the persistent gap between tourists' pro-environmental values and their actual travel behaviour. The review identified three dominant thematic strands: value-behaviour inconsistency, green identity and group influence, and situational constraints, including destination-level greenwashing. Together, these strands highlight the multifaceted nature of dissonance in tourism, emerging from individual psychology, social identity, and structural context. Tourists may rationalize their behaviour, defer responsibility, or respond to environmental cues in ways that maintain dissonance rather than resolve it. As such, cognitive dissonance should be understood not as a temporary psychological discomfort to be corrected, but as an ongoing negotiation shaped by values, norms, and the tourism environment itself. The article contributes a conceptual map of how dissonance is experienced and managed in green tourism, offering a framework that can inform both theory development and practical intervention.

Future research should pursue several key directions to advance the field. First, greater contextual and cultural diversity is needed. Existing literature is heavily concentrated in Europe, North America, and East Asia, limiting understanding of how cultural values, social norms, and infrastructure shape dissonance in other regions—particularly the Global South. This geographical imbalance also restricts the development of managerial and policy insights that are sensitive to varying socioeconomic and cultural contexts. Expanding research in underrepresented regions would not only broaden theoretical generalizability but also inform more inclusive sustainability strategies that reflect diverse tourism realities. Second, most stud-

ies rely on cross-sectional data, which fails to capture how dissonance evolves during the tourist experience. Longitudinal designs, mobile-based data collection, or digital ethnography could offer deeper insights into real-time coping mechanisms. Moreover, experimental research remains scarce. Future work should test interventions such as nudges, identity-based messaging, or default options to examine their effectiveness in reducing dissonance.

Furthermore, future research could explore how social comparison processes—particularly within digital media environments—shape tourists' experience and resolution of cognitive dissonance. As this review highlights the significance of social identity and group influence in moderating value-behaviour inconsistencies, examining how online interactions and destination portrayals reinforce or challenge these dynamics would provide a natural extension of the current findings. Finally, integrating cognitive dissonance theory with complementary frameworks, such as moral psychology, social identity theory, or habit formation models, may yield more robust explanatory power. Ultimately, there is a need to include industry and policymaker perspectives to better understand how tourism providers perceive and respond to tourist dissonance. Addressing cognitive dissonance in this context requires not only changing minds, but also changing systems. Sustainable behaviour can be better supported through infrastructure, messaging, and social mechanisms that reduce friction and increase alignment between tourists' values and available choices.

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