SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES AND QUALITY EDUCATION IN INFLUENCING CONSUMER PREFERENCES AND ENGAGEMENT IN ECOTOURISM DESTINATIONS

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Abstract. *This study explores the impact of sustainable practices on consumer choices in eco-tourism destinations, focusing on natural areas. Using a quantitative survey methodology, the research examines consumer preferences, challenges in eco-tourism, and their relationship with sustainable practices. Data analysis was conducted using DataTab statistical software to measure correlations, variances, and other key metrics. Findings highlight a strong correlation between consumer interest in eco-friendly accommodations, cultural authenticity, and support for local conservation efforts. The study identifies areas requiring improvement, such as enhancing communication with locals and aligning interpretative activities with eco-friendly offerings. Recommendations emphasize the integration of Total Quality Management (TQM) principles, fostering cultural sensitivity, improving service quality, and promoting sustainability through education and certifications. These strategies aim to address consumer expectations and support the growth of eco-tourism.*

Keywords: *Eco-tourism, sustainable practices, consumer preferences, Total Quality Management (TQM), cultural authenticity*

Introduction

The International Ecotourism Society (2015) defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that involves interpretation and education, sustains the wellbeing of local people, and assists in the conservation of the environment." Although the expansion of tourism has the capacity to substantially bolster regional economies and generate substantial employment opportunities in key coastal regions, it also poses a number of substantial socio-ecological challenges. Over the course of the past quarter century, there has been a considerable increase in both the supply of ecotourism and the demand for it. While this is going on, ecotourism, which is a specific type of tourist development, is becoming more and more recognized and legitimized as a method of attaining sustainable development in regions that are destinations. There is a lot of support for ecotourism, even though there is no proof that demand is what has caused the increase. This widespread support is based on the premise that tourists themselves are seeking more responsible and ecologically suitable types of tourism.

Literature review

Consumer preferences on eco-tourism development

In the past quarter century, there has been a substantial increase in both the supply and demand for ecotourism. Simultaneously, ecotourism has gained recognition and validity as a distinct type of tourism development that facilitates sustainable progress in destination regions. According to Liu et al. (2017), tourists are the most active and important human agents in the tourist destination system. This is due to the fact that their activities and movements connect them

to the tourist attractions of the destination. Similarly, a study was undertaken by Smith and Brown (2021) to ascertain the preferences of consumers with respect to the advancement of ecotourism in developing regions. The findings of their study highlighted the need to adopt responsible tourism practices and maintain cultural authenticity. The consumers have indicated a need for immersive experiences that would enable them to interact with the natural world and the communities that are located nearby while also limiting the detrimental effects on the environment. Likewise, according to Supianti (2015), customer preferences are primarily comprised of the customers' best judgment or desires. However, Dorin (2012) argues that investor and tourist participation have had an adverse impact on the values of populations. Consumerism, as defined by the author (Dorin, 2012), can result from tourism and globalization. It is "an increase in demand for consumption of an expanding variety of products and services." As per the author's assertion, consumerism can potentially exert adverse impacts on the culture and traditions of communities by altering the fundamental manner in which individuals formerly lived. Considering out of the box approach that applying Total Quality Management (TQM) principles, like continuous improvement and customer focus, can help eco-tourism providers meet consumer demands for sustainability and authenticity. Just as TQM emphasizes listening to customers and adapting to their needs, eco-tourism can prioritize meaningful experiences, environmental preservation, and ethical practices to build trust and create lasting impact. Integrating technology and engaging local communities further enhances the overall experience, aligning with both consumer expectations and sustainability goals (Utkirov, 2023)

Sustainable tourism

The travel and tourism sector has recognized sustainability as a significant issue, leading to an increased focus on environmentally conscious travel among tourists (Sharma et al., 2022). (Saleem et al., 2021) By incorporating hosts into socio-cultural, ecological, and economic initiatives, sustainable tourism management benefits both the local communities that accommodate tourists and the hosts themselves. Cabral and Dhar (2020) similarly identify ecotourism, which falls under the umbrella of sustainable tourism, as a highly prospective sector in the tourism industry. According to Buckley (1994), ecotourism can be described as a form of tourism that advocates for the responsible use of natural resources, operates in a sustainable manner, contributes to environmental preservation, and involves an informed interpretation of the environment. Previous studies have shown that there is a growing interest in ecotourism travel, specifically regarding its effects on sustainability, the challenges and potential benefits of ecotourism implementation, the role of local communities, the advancement of ecotourism at the community level, and the educational prospects for wildlife tourists (Boley & Green, 2016; Chen & Rahman, 2018; Coria & Calfucura, 2012; Das & Chatterjee, 2015; Shoo & So, 2015). Conversely, current tourism research suggests that guests are increasingly concerned with the entirety of the tourism experience—a critical consideration for service providers as well (Lee & Jan, 2018; Lu et al., 2015). The visitor experience involves active participation from tourists through both favourable and unfavourable interactions, as perceived by both travellers and providers of tourism services.

Tourist Engagement: Bridging AI and Eco-Tourism

Studies (Cabiddu et al., 2014; Chen & Rahman, 2018; Mafi et al., 2020) identify several factors influencing the link between visitor satisfaction and loyalty in nature-based ecotourism, including visitor engagement, brand loyalty, destination brand image, and social media. However,

further research is needed to explore the cultural, communal, personal, and environmental elements driving engagement. While previous studies have examined how online reviews and marketplaces impact travel decisions (Ryu et al., 2021), the role of green hotels, brand communities, and green transportation in eco-tourism choices remains underexplored. Most studies rely on quantitative methods or case analyses, yet a comprehensive framework for understanding tourist engagement in ecotourism is still needed (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). Tourist engagement, originating from consumer engagement theory, involves active participation in experiences, activities, or attractions (Vivek et al., 2012). Additionally, AI technologies can transform eco-tourism by personalizing experiences, optimizing resource use, and promoting sustainability through real-time monitoring and predictive analytics, offering deeper connections with nature and supporting conservation efforts (Utkirov, 2024).

Behaviours of tourists in eco-tourism

The significance of considering tourist behaviour in the promotion of sustainable tourism development has been repeatedly underscored (see, for instance, Dolnicar, Knezevic Cvelbar, and Grun 2019; Kim and Filimonau 2017; Lee 2011). Various initiatives have been implemented to persuade travellers to independently modify their behaviour with the intention of alleviating the detrimental environmental impacts associated with tourism. Illustrative instances of such endeavours include the implementation of voluntary carbon-offset initiatives for aircraft (Ritchie, Kemperman, and Dolnicar 2021) and the provision of an opt-out alternative for routine hotel room cleaning (Dolnicar, Knezevic Cvelbar, and Grun 2019). These initiatives are both illustrations of such endeavours. It is essential to realize that the phrase "behavioural beliefs" encompasses both the favourable and unfavourable consequences that a particular behaviour will engender. The subsequent element pertains to "normative beliefs," which can be described as the customer's inclination to emulate the actions and anticipations of a specific group or individual whom the customer considers to be a benchmark. Consequently, "control beliefs" will also exert a substantial influence on the customer's intention. This discussion pertaining to components is about the potential existence of circumstances that could impact the customer's ability to perform a specific task. Tourist behaviors in eco-tourism highlight a growing preference for sustainability, cultural immersion, and meaningful experiences. Similarly, just as higher education institutions in Uzbekistan strive to meet international rankings while addressing local challenges, tourists exhibit behaviors shaped by a balance between global trends, such as sustainable travel, and local cultural or environmental offerings. These behaviors reflect an adaptation to global standards while embracing local uniqueness, driving the demand for purpose-driven travel (Utkirov, 2024b).

Factors affecting the choice of tourists in ecotourism

Ecotourism, driven by eco-friendly values, is gaining popularity as travelers recognize the environmental impact of their choices. People are increasingly willing to pay more for sustainable products (Kahn, 2007; Lee et al., 2010). Ecotourism, which emphasizes sustainable tourism and the natural beauty of destinations (Eilani, 2013), offers a way to minimize ecological harm while supporting local economies and conserving resources. Technology also plays a key role, with consumers using online platforms and social media to research and book eco-friendly travel (Garcia et al., 2022). Time constraints are a key consideration for travelers seeking to maximize activities during their trips (Litman, 2020). Travel time and transportation efficiency are key factors in tourists' decisions (Filimonau et al., 2014). Technological advances, especially in air travel, have reduced fuel use and increased travel speed, but also contributed to higher carbon

footprints (Gossling & Peeters, 2015; Eijgelaar et al., 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a shift toward nature-based, open-air tourism (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2021; Sigala, 2020). Eco-friendly tourism is expected to remain popular due to factors like sustainability, accessibility, and reliable infrastructure (Quoquab et al., 2020; Roy & Sharma, 2021). Additionally, factors like affordability, perceived value for money, and positive reviews or reputation enhance a destination's appeal. Government support and proactive policies further bolster interest by fostering trust and aligning destinations with global sustainability goals. Service quality, encompassing reliability, responsiveness, and assurance, also significantly shapes tourist satisfaction and decision-making (Utkirov, 2024c).

Methodology

This research aims to explore the role of consumer preferences in the development of eco-tourism and analyze the impact of sustainable practices. It seeks to understand how consumers contribute to eco-tourism, what factors influence their choice of eco-tourism trips, and the significance of destination, accommodation, and culture in eco-tourism decisions. Additionally, the study examines the importance of local conservation, educational, and volunteer activities in eco-tourism. The research uses a convenience sampling technique, where the researcher selected participants who were easily accessible, resulting in a sample of 212 respondents aged 18-45, who completed a 15-question survey adapted from "Consumer Preferences for Eco-Tourism Attributes" (Morrison et al., 2008). Data was analyzed using statistical tools like mean, median, mode, standard deviation, correlation, regression, and reliability tests to identify patterns in consumer preferences. A pilot test was conducted to ensure the reliability and validity of the survey, with adjustments made based on feedback. Ethical considerations were adhered to, ensuring participants were informed, participation was voluntary, and responses remained anonymous. The study's limitations include a small, geographically specific sample and incomplete or rushed survey responses. Despite these constraints, the research provides valuable insights into the factors driving the development of eco-tourism and highlights key consumer preferences for sustainable travel.

Data Analysis: Findings

Table 1: Descriptive statistics: Mean, Mode, Median, Standard deviation

	Your age	Environmental sustainability	Luxury accomodations	Adventure activities	Safety of trip	Transportation
Mean	2,69	3,43	3,10	3,36	4,18	3,67
Median	2	4	3	4	5	4
Mode	2	4	5	4	5	5
Std. Deviation	1,21	1,33	1,45	1,35	1,22	1,34
Minimum	1	1	1	1	1	1
Maximum	5	5	5	5	5	5

Age of the participants in the survey was calculated. The result of mean was 2.69. The result is between 2 and 3. In the 2-3 options of the survey, there were people from 18 to 25 years old and from 25 to 35 years old. It can be seen that people aged 18 to 35 participated in the survey. Mean of environmental sustainability average, luxury accommodations, and adventure activities were 3.43, 3.10, and 3.36, respectively (table 1). The numbers are close to 3. Option 3 of the survey was “undecided”. That is, survey participants are undecided about which factors are important when choosing an eco-tourism trip. Transportation and travel safety were 4.18 and 3.67,

respectively. The former was travel safety, and latter was transportation. Option 4 of the survey was important, so participants of survey have chosen transportation and safety of trip as an important factor (Appendix 3,4).

	Culture of country	Type of eco-tourism destinations	Communicating with local people of the visited country	Type of eco-friendly accomodations	Research and book eco-tourism experiences
Mean	3,38	2,53	3,37	2,78	2,86
Median	3	3	3	3	3
Mode	5	3	4	3	4
Std. Deviation	1,34	1,15	1,13	1,12	1,21
Minimum	1	1	1	1	1
Maximum	5	5	5	5	5

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Factors Influencing Consumer Preferences in Eco-Tourism

Mean for culture of country was 3.38, that close to 3. The third option of the survey was "undecided." Participants are undecided about the importance of the culture of the country when choosing an eco-tourism trip (table 2). Types of eco-tourism destinations: mean = 2.53, close to 2. Second option was wildlife resources, participants prefer wildlife resources. Communicating with local people of the visited country: mean = 3.37, close to 3. Option 3 was “undecided”, participants undecided about communicating with local people (Appendix 3, 4). Mean of research and book eco – tourism experiences and types of eco-friendly accomodations were 2.86 and 2.78, respectively. Participants prefer homestays and guesthouses for eco-friendly accomodations. And for research and booking most of the participants have chosen local tour operators (Appendix 3, 4).

	Paying for an eco-friendly tour package	Consumer preferences on eco-tourism development	To choose one eco-tourism provider over another	Supporting local conservation efforts	Educational activities	Interpretive activities
Mean	2,89	3,96	2,84	3,88	3,30	3,42
Median	3	5	3	4	3	3
Mode	3	5	3	5	4	3
Std. Deviation	1,18	1,29	1,27	1,18	1,17	1,15
Minimum	1	1	1	1	1	1
Maximum	5	5	5	5	5	5

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Eco-Tourism Factors Influencing Consumer Preferences and Activities

The mean of paying for an eco-friendly tour package was 2.89. Mean was close to 3. Most participants chose $500-$1,000 for payment. Participants of survey think that consumer preferences on eco-tourism development is important, mean = 3.96 (Appendix 3, 4). To choose one eco-tourism provider over another: mean = 2.84. Most of the participants have chosen Environmental certifications (table 3). That means environmental certifications are important on choosing eco-tourism provider over another. Supporting local conservation efforts: mean = 3.88, participants think that supporting local conservation efforts is important (Appendix 3, 4). Educational (mean = 3.30) and interpretive activities (mean = 3.42).

Correlation analysis

		Environmental sustainability	Luxury accomodations	Adventure activities	Safety of trip	Transportation	Culture of country
Environmental sustainability	Correlation	1	0.58	0.74	0.55	0.56	0.56
	p		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
Luxury accomodations	Correlation	0.58	1	0.69	0.39	0.6	0.58
	p	<.001		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
Adventure activities	Correlation	0.74	0.69	1	0.52	0.61	0.6
	p	<.001	<.001		<.001	<.001	<.001
Safety of trip	Correlation	0.55	0.39	0.52	1	0.61	0.44
	p	<.001	<.001	<.001		<.001	<.001
Transportation	Correlation	0.56	0.6	0.61	0.61	1	0.58
	p	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001		<.001
Culture of country	Correlation	0.56	0.58	0.6	0.44	0.58	1
	p	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	

Table 5: Correlation Matrix for Key Factors Influencing Eco-Tourism Preferences

A **Spearman correlation** was used to determine correlation. First, the correlation between environmental sustainability and other variables was considered. Luxury accommodation r = 0.58 (appendix), adventure activities r = 0.74 (Appendix 5), safety of trip r = 0.55, transportation r = 0.56, culture of country r = 0.56, a high positive correlation was found between these variables and environmental sustainability. p = <.001 Then the correlation between Luxury accommodations and other variables was determined. A positive correlation was found between variables such as adventure activities r = 0.69, safety of trip r = 0.39, transportation r = 0.6, culture of country r = 0.58. After that, a high, positive correlation was found between Adventure activities and variables such as safety of trip r = 0.52, transportation r = 0.61, culture of country r = 0.6. Then a high, positive correlation was found between Safety of trip and transportation r = 0.61, culture of country r = 0.44 (table 5).

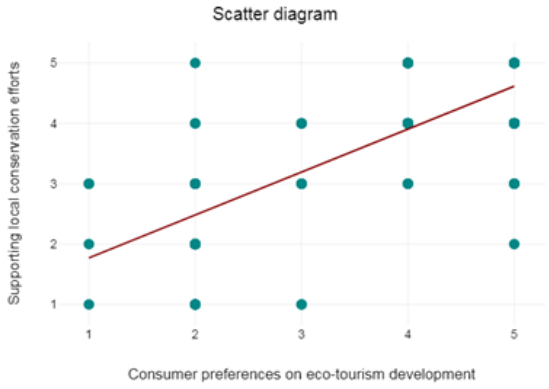

Figure 1: Scatter Diagram Showing the Relationship Between Consumer Preferences on Eco-Tourism Development and Supporting Local Conservation Efforts

Supporting local conservation efforts and consumer preferences regarding ecotourism development were correlated in a strong, positive way (r = 0.73). This indicates that, on average,

there is a positive correlation between consumer preferences regarding eco-tourism development and their level of support for local conservation efforts (figure 1). This value signifies the magnitude and orientation of the linear correlation between the type of eco-friendly accommodations and interacting with the local population of the country being visited. As inferred from the coefficient of 0.24, there is a weak positive correlation.

Regression analysis

An investigation was conducted using a linear regression analysis to assess the impact of the variable. According to the regression model, the variable the variable "meaningful experience" accounted for 69.89% of the variance attributed to consumer preferences regarding the development of ecotourism (table 7). To determine whether this value differed significantly from zero, an ANOVA was applied. The effect was determined to be significantly different from zero using the current sample ($F = 487.33$, $p < .001$, $R2 = 0.7$).

R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Standard error of the estimate
0.84	0.7	0.7	0.71

Table 7: ANOVA Results for Regression Analysis

Reliability (Cronbach's Alpha)

	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Luxury accomodations	0.54	0.94
Environmental sustainability	0.74	0.94
Adventure activities	0.69	0.94
Safety of trip	0.82	0.94
Transportation	0.71	0.94
Culture of country	0.57	0.94
Consumer preferences on eco-tourism development	0.8	0.94
Supporting local conservation efforts	0.75	0.94
Educational activities	0.69	0.94
Interpretive activities	0.63	0.94
Participating in volunteer or conservation activities	0.68	0.94
Positive impact on the local environment and communities	0.76	0.94
Personal fulfillment	0.8	0.94
Learning new things about nature and conservation	0.71	0.94
Meaningful experience	0.8	0.94
Communicating with local people of the visited country	0.38	0.94

Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
0.94	16

Table 8: Reliability Analysis Using Corrected Item-Total Correlation and Cronbach's Alpha

Cronbach's alpha equals 0.94. The observed value is significantly elevated, given that Cronbach's alpha falls within the interval of 0 to 1. A value of 0.94 indicates a high degree of reliability and consistency among the elements in the set. In general, a Cronbach's alpha value reaching 0.7 is considered acceptable, while values exceeding 0.8 and 0.9 are regarded as fine and excellent, respectively. The obtained Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.94 is considered outstanding, indicating that the items demonstrate excellent internal consistency and reliably measure the underlying construct in the research (table 8).

Chi-square test

	Chi2	df	p
Type of eco-friendly accomodations - Research and book eco-tourism experiences	49.04	16	<.001

Table 9: Chi-Square Test Results for the Relationship Between Booking Eco-Tourism Experiences and Researching Eco-Friendly Accommodations.

The outcomes of a Chi-square test, a frequently employed statistical test to ascertain whether a significant relationship exists between two categorical variables, are presented in the table 9. Based on the number of categories in each variable, this value is computed. Typically, the formula for a Chi-square test is (variable B: one-category count in variable A) minus one category count in variable A. Particularly in this case, (5-1) * (5-1) = 16.

Discussions and Recommendations

There was negative correlation between two variables Communicating with local people of the visited country and to choose one eco – tourism provider over another. In its interactions with locals, an ecotourism provider that prioritizes cultural sensitivity is one to contemplate selecting.

A lot of companies incorporate educational initiatives into their excursions, which impart knowledge pertaining to the indigenous culture, biodiversity, and local environment. The organizations are highly regarded for its certifications from reputable bodies, including the Rainforest Alliance and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), which attest to its dedication to sustainability (Solway, 2020). Negative correlation can be improved with this strategy.

Moreover, there was negative correlation between types of eco – friendly souvenirs and interpretive activities. Organizations organize engaging seminars where attendees can acquire knowledge about the sustainable practices and local culture of the area while actively engaging in interpretive exercises. Companies can improve correlation in these ways. To address the negative correlations, eco-tourism providers can apply TQM principles to enhance communication with locals and align offerings with tourist preferences. Incorporating quality education initiatives, such as workshops on cultural sensitivity and sustainability, can foster stronger connections and loyalty. Aligning eco-friendly souvenirs with interpretive activities through customer feedback and interactive sessions, like crafting eco-souvenirs, boosts engagement.

Conclusion

This research focused on analyzing the impact of sustainable practices on consumer choices in eco-tourism destinations within natural areas. During the study, issues in eco-tourism and consumer preferences were examined, with the literature review providing foundational insights.

A quantitative survey methodology was employed to capture people's opinions and preferences, and the results highlighted consumer expectations and existing shortcomings in eco-tourism practices. Negative correlations in certain areas were identified, and recommendations were made for improvement. The influence of consumers on the growth of eco-tourism was found to be substantial, with a growing emphasis on environmental and cultural sustainability.

Integrating Total Quality Management (TQM) principles in eco-tourism and education sectors can further strengthen these outcomes. Eco-tourism operators can adopt TQM by continuously improving their sustainable practices, engaging local communities, and aligning interpretative activities with consumer expectations. Similarly, educational initiatives that promote sustainability awareness among tourists and providers can help embed eco-friendly practices across the industry. This holistic approach underscores the importance of ethical considerations in shaping consumer choices and fostering the sustainable growth of eco-tourism.

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