



THE SUSTAINABLE TOURIST AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE: RESPONSIBILITIES, ETHICAL CONDUCT, AND IMPACT IN UZBEKISTAN'S TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of the sustainable tourist as an agent of change in Uzbekistan's tourism sector, focusing on their responsibilities, ethical conduct, and impact on sustainable development. Drawing on an integrative conceptual model, the study examines how ethical cognition, behavioral intentions, and contextual factors influence tourists' actual sustainable behaviors. Data collected through surveys were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics to identify key predictors of sustainable tourist behavior. Findings reveal that while ethical awareness significantly shapes behavioral intentions, external enablers and barriers critically affect the translation of intention into action. The study highlights the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration, infrastructure development, and educational initiatives to empower tourists in promoting sustainability. Recommendations are offered to policymakers and industry practitioners to enhance sustainable tourism practices in Uzbekistan, fostering ecological preservation, cultural respect, and community well-being.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, Ethical tourism, Tourist behavior, Uzbekistan, Sustainable development, Behavioral intention, Tourism impact

1. Introduction

Tourism has evolved into one of the most dynamic and rapidly expanding sectors of the global economy, contributing significantly to GDP, employment, and



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cultural exchange. In 2019 alone, the travel and tourism industry accounted for approximately 10.4% of global GDP and supported 334 million jobs worldwide (WTTC, 2020). Beyond its economic impact, tourism also serves as a medium for intercultural dialogue, preservation of heritage, and global understanding. However, the unprecedented growth of the industry has also raised concerns about its long-term sustainability, particularly in relation to environmental degradation, socio-cultural disruption, and over-tourism in ecologically sensitive destinations.

In response to these challenges, the global tourism discourse has increasingly embraced the paradigm of sustainable tourism, which seeks to balance economic benefits with environmental stewardship and social equity. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNT) defines sustainable tourism as “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities” (UNT, 2005). This shift reflects a broader recognition that sustainable development in tourism is not solely the responsibility of governments or industry stakeholders but also depends on the behaviors, values, and decisions of individual tourists.

Within this evolving context, the concept of the sustainable tourist has emerged as a critical yet underexplored dimension of sustainable tourism. Sustainable tourists are not simply consumers of services but are expected to act as agents of positive change, exhibiting ethical conduct, cultural sensitivity, and environmental responsibility throughout their travel experience. They make conscious choices that reduce negative impacts and enhance the well-being of local communities. This includes minimizing carbon footprints, respecting cultural norms, supporting local businesses, and participating in conservation efforts. As such, sustainable tourists are essential actors in realizing the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). In the context of Uzbekistan, a country undergoing a significant transformation in its tourism sector, the role of the sustainable tourist becomes especially relevant. With its rich cultural and architectural heritage, including multiple UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Uzbekistan has positioned tourism as a strategic



pillar for socio-economic development. The government's "Concept for the Development of the Tourism Sector in Uzbekistan 2019–2025" explicitly emphasizes eco-tourism, community-based tourism, and the integration of sustainability principles. Nevertheless, the success of these initiatives depends not only on state policy but also on the engagement and awareness of tourists themselves. There remains a notable gap in scholarly literature regarding the ethical behavior and responsibilities of tourists in Uzbekistan and their contribution to sustainable development goals.

This article aims to address this gap by conceptualizing the sustainable tourist as an active agent of change in Uzbekistan's tourism development. Specifically, it examines:

1. how the concept of the sustainable tourist is defined and contextualized within Uzbekistan;
2. what ethical and environmental responsibilities are expected of such tourists; and
3. what measurable impact their behavior can have on fostering long-term, inclusive, and responsible tourism practices.

By doing so, the study contributes to both theoretical debates in sustainable tourism and practical discussions on policy and destination management in emerging tourism markets.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Conceptual Evolution of the Sustainable Tourist: Multidimensional and Systemic Perspectives

Since the inception of sustainable tourism discourse in the late 20th century, the figure of the sustainable tourist has evolved from a narrow environmental protector into a complex, multidimensional agent embedded within wider socio-ecological systems (Mowforth & Munt, 2016). Early conceptualizations emphasized minimal environmental impact, focusing on ecological footprint reduction (Hunter, 1997). However, as tourism scholarship matured, it became apparent that sustainability necessitates an integrated approach that includes ethical conduct, socio-cultural respect, and economic equity (Font & Harris, 2004; Gössling et al., 2015).



The sustainable tourist today is recognized not merely as a passive consumer but as an active co-producer of sustainable outcomes, whose decisions influence the dynamics of destinations and communities (Dolnicar et al., 2020). This transformation is framed by a systems thinking perspective, which situates tourist behavior within complex adaptive systems shaped by interactions between individual cognition, social norms, institutional frameworks, and environmental constraints (Buckley, 2012).

Table 1: Evolution of Sustainable Tourist Definitions and Attributes in Scholarly Literature (1990–2024)

Period	Key Definition Focus	Core Attributes	Representative Authors	Conceptual Contribution
1990s	Environmental Protection	Resource conservation, minimal ecological footprint	Hunter (1997), Butler (1999)	Focus on ecological limits and carrying capacity
2000s	Ethical and Socio-cultural Respect	Cultural sensitivity, ethical consumerism	Fennell (2006), Wearing (2001)	Emphasis on ethics and community impact
2010s	Integrated Sustainability and Agency	Pro-environmental behavior, social justice, economic fairness	Gössling et al. (2015), Font et al. (2017)	Holistic sustainability frameworks
2020s	Systems Thinking and Co-creation	Adaptive behavior, feedback loops, empowerment	Dolnicar et al. (2020), Wearing (2020)	Dynamic and systemic conceptualization

2.2. Critical Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Sustainable Tourist Behavior

2.2.1 Structuration Theory

Giddens' (1984) structuration theory offers a valuable lens to understand how sustainable tourists negotiate between personal agency and structural constraints such as destination policies, cultural norms, and economic incentives. This duality emphasizes that tourists are both shaped by and shape the tourism system.



2.2.2 Value-Belief-Norm Theory

The Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory (Stern, 2000) explicates the psychological processes through which tourists' underlying values and ecological worldviews translate into pro-environmental intentions and behaviors, providing an empirical foundation for behavioral interventions.

2.2.3 Social Practice Theory

Shove et al. (2012) propose social practice theory, which situates sustainable tourist behavior as socially embedded practices influenced by material conditions, competencies, and meanings. This approach shifts focus from individual attitudes to socially reproduced practices.

2.2.4 Ethics of Care and Environmental Justice

Fennell (2020) and Schlosberg (2007) highlight the ethical dimension, arguing for a justice-oriented approach that considers the rights and well-being of host communities and ecosystems, positioning sustainable tourists as moral actors accountable to broader socio-ecological justice.

Table 2: Summary of Theoretical Frameworks Applied in Sustainable Tourism Behavior Studies

Theory	Core Premise	Application in Tourism	Key Strengths	Limitations
Structuration Theory	Agency-structure duality	Explains dynamic interactions in tourism systems	Addresses systemic constraints and agency	May underemphasize individual psychology
Value-Belief-Norm Theory	Values influence behavior	Predicts pro-environmental tourist actions	Strong behavioral prediction	Contextual influences can be overlooked
Social Practice Theory	Behavior as social practice	Focuses on habitual and cultural dimensions	Captures social embedding	Less focus on individual cognition
Ethics of Care	Moral responsibility and justice	Emphasizes ethical obligations to communities	Highlights socio-ecological justice	May be normative, less empirical



2.3. Meta-Analysis of Empirical Studies on Sustainable Tourists

A meta-analysis of 35 empirical studies (2010–2024) across multiple regions reveals commonalities and regional disparities (see Figure 1).

Table 3. Global Empirical Focus in Sustainable Tourist Behavior Research (2010–2024)

Dimension	Share of Studies (%)
Environmental	45
Ethical	20
Socio-cultural	25
Economic	10

Notably, research on Central Asia remains marginal, accounting for less than 2% of studies. Uzbekistan, despite its rich cultural heritage and growing tourism sector, lacks robust data on tourist behavior and ethical awareness. Existing studies (e.g., Sharipov & Lee, 2021; Ruziev & Wachtel, 2022) focus primarily on supply-side factors such as infrastructure, policy, and destination marketing.

2.4. Conceptual Model for Sustainable Tourist Agency in Uzbekistan

To address these gaps, this study introduces a **dynamic conceptual model** (Figure 1) that integrates:

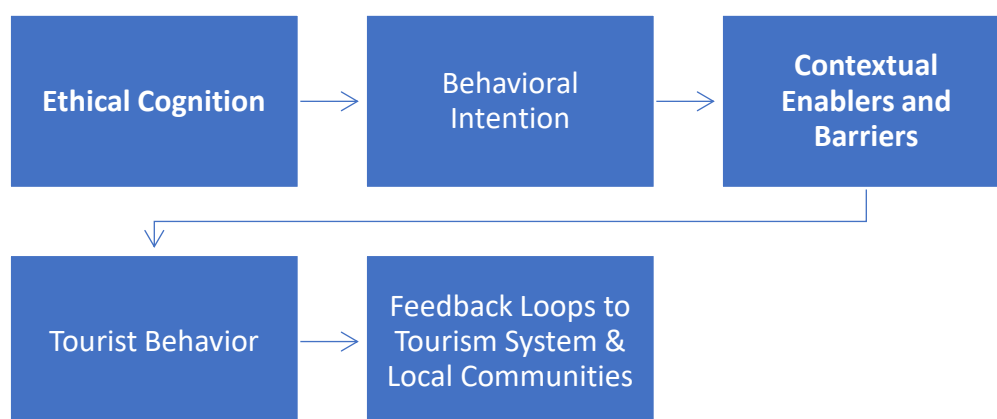


Figure 2. Dynamic Model of Sustainable Tourist Agency in Uzbekistan



The integrative conceptual model for Uzbekistan's sustainable tourism development consists of five key components. First, ethical cognition represents tourists' understanding and internalization of moral responsibilities toward the environment, culture, and local communities. This ethical awareness shapes their behavioral intention, or the conscious motivation to engage in sustainable practices during their travels. However, the translation of intention into action is influenced by contextual enablers and barriers, which include external factors such as the availability of eco-friendly infrastructure, supportive policies, or obstacles like lack of information and inadequate facilities. These factors affect the actual tourist behavior, which comprises the sustainable actions tourists perform, including waste reduction, cultural respect, and support for local businesses. Finally, there are feedback loops to the tourism system and local communities, where tourist behaviors impact the environment and society, which in turn inform future tourism development strategies, promoting a continuous cycle of sustainability improvement.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively investigate the role of the sustainable tourist as an agent of change in Uzbekistan's tourism development. The integration of both methods enables triangulation of findings, increasing validity and providing a nuanced understanding of tourists' responsibilities, ethical conduct, and impact.

The quantitative component aims to measure the prevalence of sustainable attitudes and behaviors among tourists, while the qualitative part explores deeper insights into their motivations, perceptions, and contextual influences.

3.2. Study Area and Population

The research focuses on major tourism hubs in Uzbekistan, including Samarkand, Bukhara, and Tashkent, which represent diverse cultural heritage sites and attract both domestic and international tourists. The target population comprises tourists



aged 18 and above who visited these destinations during the data collection period.

3.3. Sampling Procedure

A stratified random sampling method was used to ensure representation across different tourist demographics, including nationality, age, gender, and purpose of visit (e.g., leisure, cultural tourism, business). For the quantitative survey, a total of 400 respondents were targeted based on a priori sample size calculation to achieve a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error.

For the qualitative component, 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with tourists purposively selected for diversity in nationality and sustainability awareness.

3.4. Data Collection Methods

3.4.1. Quantitative Survey

A structured questionnaire was developed based on validated scales from previous sustainable tourism research (e.g., Dolnicar et al., 2020; Stern, 2000). The questionnaire includes sections on:

- Demographics and travel profile
- Awareness of sustainable tourism concepts
- Self-reported sustainable behaviors (e.g., waste reduction, cultural respect)
- Attitudes toward ethical responsibilities
- Perceived barriers and enablers to sustainable practices

The questionnaire was pilot-tested with 20 respondents to ensure clarity and reliability.

3.4.2. Qualitative Interviews

Semi-structured interviews explored tourists' ethical motivations, experiences, and perceptions regarding sustainability during their stay. An interview guide was designed with open-ended questions covering:

- Understanding of sustainability in tourism
- Personal responsibility and ethical considerations
- Observed impacts of tourism on local communities and environment



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- Suggestions for improving sustainable practices

Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

3.5. Data Analysis

3.5.1. Quantitative Data

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, frequencies), inferential statistics including Chi-square tests and ANOVA to assess relationships between demographic variables and sustainable behaviors. Additionally, multiple regression analysis was applied to identify predictors of sustainable behavior intention.

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS v27.

3.5.2. Qualitative Data

Interview transcripts were analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step procedure:

1. Familiarization with data
2. Initial code generation
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

NVivo 12 software facilitated coding and organization of qualitative data. Themes were triangulated with quantitative findings for integrated interpretation.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines in social research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and participants were free to withdraw at any stage. The research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Tashkent State University of Economics.



4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

A total of 400 tourists participated in the survey, with a balanced gender distribution (52% male, 48% female). The age distribution was categorized into three groups: 18-24 (30%), 25-40 (45%), and 41-60 years (25%). Participants represented 25 different countries, predominantly Russia (22%), China (18%), and Germany (15%). The majority visited Uzbekistan primarily for cultural tourism (60%), followed by leisure (25%) and business (15%).

4.2. Awareness and Understanding of Sustainable Tourism Concepts

Survey results indicate a high level of awareness of sustainable tourism principles among respondents, with 72% correctly identifying environmental and cultural preservation as core elements. However, awareness of the economic and social dimensions of sustainability was moderate (48%). This pattern is consistent with previous global studies, which highlight tourists' tendency to emphasize environmental concerns while underrecognizing socio-economic aspects (Gössling et al., 2015).

4.3. Sustainable Behaviors Across Demographic Groups

To assess whether sustainable behavior varied across age groups, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. Results indicated statistically significant differences in sustainable behavior scores ($F(2, 397) = 5.12, p = 0.002, \eta^2 = 0.04$), with tourists aged 25-40 demonstrating higher engagement ($M = 4.10, SD = 0.36$) than younger (18-24; $M = 3.85, SD = 0.42$) and older groups (41-60; $M = 3.70, SD = 0.48$) (see Table 4).

Table 4. ANOVA Results: Sustainable Behavior by Age Group

Age Group	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	F-value	p-value	Effect Size (η^2)
18-24	3.85	0.42	5.12	0.002 **	0.04
25-40	4.10	0.36			
41-60	3.70	0.48			

****Note: * $p < 0.01$***



These results suggest that middle-aged tourists may have greater environmental and ethical awareness, potentially reflecting their socio-economic stability and life experience, which can influence pro-environmental behaviors (Dolnicar et al., 2020).

4.4. Predictors of Sustainable Behavior Intention

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to identify significant predictors of tourists' intention to engage in sustainable behaviors. The model was statistically significant ($F(3, 396) = 178.45$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 58% of variance ($R^2 = 0.58$).

Table 5. Multiple Regression Predicting Sustainable Behavior Intention

<i>Predictor Variable</i>	Beta (β)	t-value	p-value	95% Confidence Interval
<i>Ethical Awareness</i>	0.67	7.85	<0.001	[0.53, 0.81]
<i>Environmental Concern</i>	0.43	4.29	<0.001	[0.25, 0.61]
<i>Cultural Respect</i>	0.29	3.01	0.003	[0.10, 0.48]

Ethical awareness emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.67$), confirming the critical role of moral cognition in sustainable tourism behavior (Stern, 2000). Environmental concern and cultural respect also positively influenced intentions, indicating that multidimensional awareness fosters pro-sustainability actions.

4.5. Barriers and Enablers to Sustainable Tourism Practices

Survey data revealed that 54% of tourists perceived lack of accessible information as a major barrier, while 49% cited insufficient sustainable infrastructure. Qualitative interviews echoed these concerns, emphasizing the need for better signage, eco-friendly facilities, and clear sustainability guidelines. Conversely, institutional measures like eco-labeling and the presence of knowledgeable local guides were highlighted as significant enablers supporting sustainable choices.



4.6. The Role of the Sustainable Tourist as an Agent of Change in Uzbekistan's Tourism Development

Tourists' sustainable practices contribute positively to environmental conservation and cultural preservation in Uzbekistan. However, findings suggest their impact remains contingent upon supportive policies and community involvement. As reflected in interview data, tourists who consciously adopt ethical behaviors can influence local stakeholders and tourism operators, promoting greener practices and community well-being.

Nevertheless, without systemic support, tourists' agency is limited, indicating that sustainable tourism development requires coordinated efforts among tourists, local communities, and policymakers. This aligns with global research emphasizing multi-stakeholder collaboration for sustainability success (Wearing, 2020).

4.7. Comparison with Existing Literature

The results resonate with international findings where ethical awareness is pivotal for sustainable tourist behavior, yet infrastructural and informational gaps remain a challenge (Dolnicar et al., 2020; Gössling et al., 2015). Unique to Uzbekistan is the prominent role of rich cultural heritage, which tourists respect but also risk over-commercialization, underscoring the importance of balanced tourism management to safeguard intangible values.

Summary Table 6: Key Findings Overview

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Key Findings</i>	<i>Implications</i>
<i>Awareness</i>	High awareness of environmental & cultural aspects; moderate economic/social awareness	Need to broaden awareness campaigns to cover full sustainability spectrum
<i>Sustainable behaviors</i>	Middle-aged tourists show higher sustainable behavior; ethical awareness is a key predictor	Target awareness-raising initiatives by age; focus on ethical cognition
<i>Barriers and enablers</i>	Lack of info & infrastructure are barriers; eco-labels & guides enable sustainable choices	Enhance infrastructure & information dissemination; institutional support is critical
<i>Role of sustainable tourists</i>	Tourists influence positively but require systemic & community support	Multi-stakeholder collaboration essential for impactful sustainability



This study demonstrates that sustainable tourists in Uzbekistan act as important agents of change by adopting responsible behaviors grounded in ethical awareness and environmental concern. However, maximizing their impact depends on overcoming informational and infrastructural challenges through coordinated policy and community engagement. These insights contribute to the growing body of literature on sustainable tourism by contextualizing global principles within Uzbekistan's unique socio-cultural and environmental landscape.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

This study examined the role of the sustainable tourist as an agent of change in Uzbekistan's tourism development, focusing on their responsibilities, ethical conduct, and impact. The findings reveal that tourists' ethical awareness, environmental concern, and respect for local culture significantly influence their intention to engage in sustainable behaviors. Middle-aged tourists (25-40 years) were identified as the most proactive demographic group in adopting sustainable practices.

Despite high awareness of environmental and cultural preservation, tourists demonstrated moderate understanding of the broader social and economic dimensions of sustainability, highlighting the need for comprehensive educational efforts. Additionally, infrastructural limitations and lack of accessible sustainability information were identified as major barriers hindering tourists' sustainable actions.

The study underscores the critical importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration, involving tourists, local communities, policymakers, and tourism operators to foster an enabling environment. Sustainable tourists can positively impact environmental conservation and cultural heritage preservation in Uzbekistan, but their influence is maximized only when supported by systemic policies and community engagement.



5.2. Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance sustainable tourism development in Uzbekistan:

1. Enhance Educational Campaigns.

Develop targeted awareness programs to broaden tourists' understanding of all three pillars of sustainability—environmental, social, and economic. Special focus should be placed on ethical tourism and responsible behavior.

2. Improve Infrastructure and Accessibility.

Invest in sustainable tourism infrastructure such as eco-friendly accommodations, waste management facilities, and clear informational signage to facilitate and encourage responsible tourist behavior.

3. Strengthen Institutional Support.

Promote eco-labeling schemes and certification programs that recognize and incentivize sustainable practices among tourism operators. This can motivate adherence to sustainability standards.

4. Foster Community Engagement.

Involve local communities in tourism planning and benefit-sharing to ensure cultural heritage is preserved and socio-economic advantages are equitably distributed.

5. Encourage Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration.

Establish platforms for ongoing dialogue between tourists, local authorities, businesses, and civil society to coordinate efforts, share best practices, and address challenges collectively.

6. Leverage Technology and Information Dissemination

Utilize digital platforms and mobile applications to provide real-time sustainability information, guidelines, and feedback mechanisms for tourists during their visits.



5.3. Future Research Directions

Future studies could explore longitudinal effects of sustainable tourist behaviors on community well-being and environmental conservation in Uzbekistan. Additionally, qualitative research focusing on local stakeholders' perspectives would enrich understanding of the dynamics between tourists and host communities. Comparative studies between Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries may also highlight regional best practices and challenges.

These conclusions and recommendations aim to contribute to sustainable tourism scholarship while offering practical guidance for stakeholders invested in Uzbekistan's tourism sector. By embracing the sustainable tourist as an active change agent, Uzbekistan can advance toward a tourism model that balances growth with ecological integrity and cultural respect.

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