

Eco-Anxiety and Tourist Destinations: Emerging Challenges in Destination Image and Sustainable

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between eco-anxiety and the perceived importance of environmental and sustainability-related issues in tourism, aiming to assess whether heightened levels of eco-anxiety influence tourists' prioritization of specific sustainability challenges. Based on a sample of 247 respondents, the research employed a structured questionnaire to gather data on both self-reported eco-anxiety levels and perceived importance rankings for ten tourism-related problems. Quantitative analysis included the computation of mean scores and Pearson correlation coefficients, followed by scatter plot visualizations to explore the patterns of association between variables. Results revealed that while climate change and greenwashing were rated as highly important issues, their correlations with eco-anxiety were only moderate ($r = 0.42$ and $r = 0.22$, respectively). Other issues, such as the lack of clear regulations or the high costs of eco-friendly solutions, demonstrated weak or insignificant relationships with eco-anxiety levels. The scatter plots showed considerable variability across all levels of eco-anxiety, suggesting that this emotional state does not consistently predict how individuals assess the importance of specific issues. Emotional concern for the environment appears to function more as a generalized disposition rather than a determinant of specific cognitive evaluations. These findings emphasize the complexity of consumer attitudes in sustainable tourism and underline the need for communication strategies that are both emotionally engaging and factually credible, tailored to diverse informational and psychological profiles.

Keywords

Eco-anxiety, tourism destination, marketing strategies, sustainable tourism, climate change.

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Introduction

In recent decades, the accelerated degradation of ecosystems and the intensification of extreme climate events have generated not only visible changes in the physical environment but also profound shifts in the psychological and behavioral dynamics of contemporary society. Within this evolving context, *eco-anxiety* — a form of anxiety related to environmental threats — has emerged as a significant psychological phenomenon (Clayton et al., 2021). This emotional response encompasses a complex range of feelings, including guilt, anger, sadness, helplessness, and exhaustion (Pihkala, 2020; Clayton and Karazsia, 2020; Verplanken, Marks and Dobromir, 2020), and has begun to influence decision-making processes, including those related to tourism consumption. Although not officially recognized as a clinical diagnosis, eco-anxiety shares symptoms with anxiety disorders, such as insomnia, panic attacks, and loss of appetite

(Castelloe, 2018; Pihkala, 2019). These reactions may be directed toward the self, others, or nature itself (Helm, Kemper and White, 2018).

1. Literature review

Climate change has also been associated with a wide range of psychological effects, including PTSD, depression, and chronic stress (Clayton et al., 2021). Young people are particularly vulnerable due to their long-term exposure to environmental risks and a lack of adaptive coping mechanisms (Diffey et al., 2022). Moreover, cultural differences shape the way eco-anxiety is experienced and expressed. For instance, social hierarchy and cultural values influence how individuals interpret and internalize environmental messages (Brewer and Venaik, 2011). Most existing research on eco-anxiety remains Western-centric, indicating the need for studies in underrepresented contexts, particularly in developing economies across Africa and Asia (Mkono and Hughes, 2020; Joshua et al., 2023). In the tourism and hospitality sector, increasing attention has been given to ecological emotions and psychoterratic syndromes such as eco-guilt, flight shame, and ecological grief (Crossley, 2020; Mkono and Hughes, 2020). However, fewer studies explore eco-anxiety and related concepts like solastalgia (Lalicic, 2020), especially in relation to tourist behavior. As the tourism industry contributes significantly to global greenhouse gas emissions, eco-conscious travelers may experience emotional conflict and cognitive dissonance. These tensions often result in changes in travel preferences, such as avoiding air travel, opting for low-impact alternatives, or seeking eco-certified destinations (Newman, 2019). Despite growing interest in sustainability, much of the research in this area analyzes online discourse or virtual behaviors, with limited engagement of tourists in their active, performative roles (Mkono, 2020; Talwar et al., 2022). Yet understanding responses such as eco-paralysis — the feeling of being overwhelmed and immobilized by environmental threats—can offer valuable insights into emotional and behavioral reactions to climate change (D'Arco, Marino and Resciniti, 2023; Cleveland, Robertson and Volk, 2020).

Within this complex emotional and environmental landscape, destination marketing faces the challenge of reconciling tourists' need for escapism with their increasing desire for authenticity and sustainability. In an era of heightened environmental sensitivity, marketing strategies must avoid superficial "greenwashing" and instead promote credible and transparent solutions (Peattie and Crane, 2005; Grigorescu et al., 2020). Media representations can play both constructive and detrimental roles, by either amplifying eco-anxiety through sensationalism or fostering ecological awareness and literacy (Pihkala, 2019; Boykoff and Pearman, 2019). This study aims to explore how eco-anxiety shapes the perception and selection of tourist destinations, identifying key marketing challenges that arise from this emergent emotional response. By doing so, the research contributes to a better understanding of the intersection between environmental psychology and sustainable tourism marketing.

2. Research methodology

To explore how eco-anxiety influences perceptions of destination marketing, a quantitative study was conducted using a questionnaire developed through Google Forms. The data collection period extended from October 2024 to January 2025. The questionnaire was distributed via social media networks (primarily Facebook), educational platforms (such as Moodle and Microsoft Teams), and through personal contact networks. A total of 247 respondents completed the survey. The data collected were processed and analyzed using Microsoft Excel. The research instrument was structured into three main sections, each targeting a distinct set of variables relevant to the study's objectives. The first section collected demographic data to help define the profile of respondents. The second section focused on measuring the level of eco-anxiety. Instead of employing established psychometric scales from the literature, the researchers opted for customized questions designed to reveal respondents' emotional and cognitive relationships with environmental issues. Responses were recorded using a five-point Likert scale, and scores were used to compute an average eco-anxiety level across the sample. In the third section, participants were asked to rank ten specific challenges faced by destination marketing in the context of growing eco-anxiety. This ranking exercise (forced classification) enabled the identification of key concerns and perceived priorities among the public.

The *primary objective* of this study was to rank ten proposed challenges facing destination marketing in the era of eco-anxiety and to analyze the relationship between these perceptions and respondents' average level of eco-anxiety. This goal was addressed through a series of specific objectives: *To calculate the average eco-anxiety level among respondents, based on a set of custom-designed items; To determine public perception regarding the most relevant marketing-related issues in the context of climate change and rising*

environmental concerns; To analyze the relationship between levels of eco-anxiety and the perceived ranking of destination marketing challenges, in order to identify potential significant correlations.

Based on these objectives, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- H1: Respondents rank destination marketing challenges differently depending on their general perception of sustainability in tourism.
- H2: Issues related to sustainable communication (e.g., climate change, greenwashing, cost implications) are perceived as more important than those related to infrastructure or regulatory frameworks.
- H3: The average level of eco-anxiety significantly influences the perceived severity ranking of marketing-related problems in tourist destinations.

3. Results and discussion

This section presents the results of the data analysis and interprets them in relation to the study's research objectives, with a particular focus on the relationship between levels of eco-anxiety and tourist behaviors or preferences.

a. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Analysis of the demographic data reveals a relatively balanced gender distribution, with a slightly higher proportion of male respondents (52%) compared to female respondents (46%) (Table no. 1). The majority of participants fall within the 25–45 age range (62%), and the sample is predominantly urban (69%). Most respondents report a medium income level (58%) and possess higher education qualifications, with 63% holding either a bachelor's or a master's degree. In terms of travel behavior, the data show that respondents are moderately active travelers: 67% reported taking one to two leisure trips per year over the past three years.

Table no. 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

| Sex | | | Age | | | | |
|--------------|--------|------|---|-------------------|-----------------|----------|-------|
| Male | Female | | 18-25 | 25-35 | 36-45 | 46-55 | 56-65 |
| 52 | 46 | 2 | 7 | 33 | 29 | 14 | 17 |
| Location | | | Education level | | | | |
| Rural | Urban | | High school | Bachelor's degree | Master's degree | PhDegree | |
| 31 | 69 | | 37 | 49 | 11 | 3 | |
| Income level | | | Travel frequency in the last 3 years/year | | | | |
| Low | Medium | High | Not at all | 1-2 trips | More than 3 | | |
| 20 | 58 | 22 | 11 | 67 | 19 | | |

b. Eco-Anxiety Levels Among Respondents

The level of eco-anxiety among respondents was not measured using a validated psychological scale but rather inferred from their reported reactions to various environmental issues. The questionnaire focused on several key indicators, including concern about environmental degradation, feelings of being overwhelmed, guilt and responsibility, helplessness, and a sense of personal duty to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle. These responses were interpreted as direct self-assessments rather than the result of formal psychological evaluation.

The overall distribution of responses shows a concentration around mid-levels on the Likert scale, particularly at level 2 (33.27%) and level 3 (35.05%), indicating a general trend toward moderate concern and emotional impact related to environmental issues. The overall mean eco-anxiety score was 2.7 out of 5. The findings suggest that while respondents are aware of and concerned about environmental problems, eco-anxiety is not a persistent or dominant emotional state for most of them. Respondents demonstrated an active concern for the long-term consequences of environmental degradation and acknowledged their own role in contributing to such issues. However, this awareness does not manifest as extreme distress. Many expressed a sense of personal responsibility in adopting more sustainable lifestyles, but the responses also revealed a degree of skepticism regarding the effectiveness of individual actions in the broader context of global climate change. Occasional feelings of informational overload were reported, though the emotional impact of such information was generally moderate. Environmental issues do not appear to significantly affect respondents' cognitive functions or sleep patterns, nor are they a major source of interpersonal conflict. However, they can occasionally provoke discussion or differences of opinion within social interactions.

The data presented in Chart no.1 shows that the highest average eco-anxiety score (3.10) is associated with feeling responsible for making lifestyle changes to reduce environmental impact, while the lowest score (2.17) is related to difficulty concentrating or sleeping due to environmental concerns. Overall, most responses fall in the moderate range (Level 3), which accounts for approximately 35% of all responses.

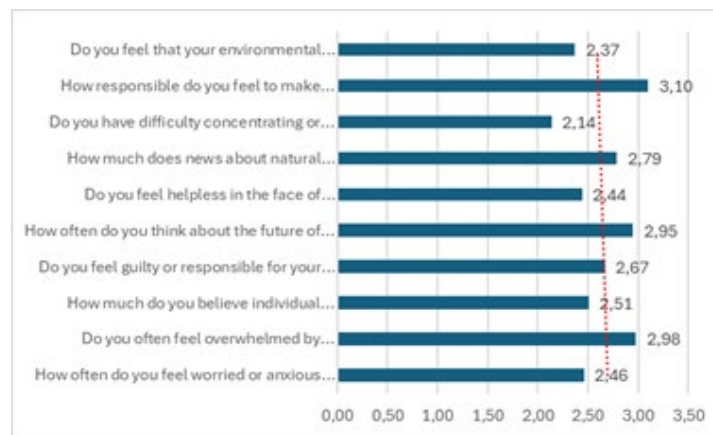


Chart no. 1. Average Score for Each Question

c. Perceived Challenges in Sustainable Tourism Marketing

The analysis of survey data collected from 247 respondents reveals significant trends in public perceptions regarding issues related to sustainable tourism. The study demonstrates a high level of internal consistency, with a response rate exceeding 90% across all questions—providing a strong foundation for interpretation.

Findings indicate that respondents are highly aware of sustainability-related challenges in tourism, with the most prominent concerns centered around the tangible impacts of climate change and the perceived lack of authenticity and concrete action toward sustainable destination management (Chart no.2). At the top of the ranking, *Climate change and its impact on destinations*” received the highest average score (4.01), reflecting a deep concern among tourists regarding the threat that climate change poses to their preferred destinations. The visible effects of climate change—such as extreme weather events and ecosystem degradation—whether experienced directly or presented through media coverage, appear to trigger eco-anxiety related to travel.

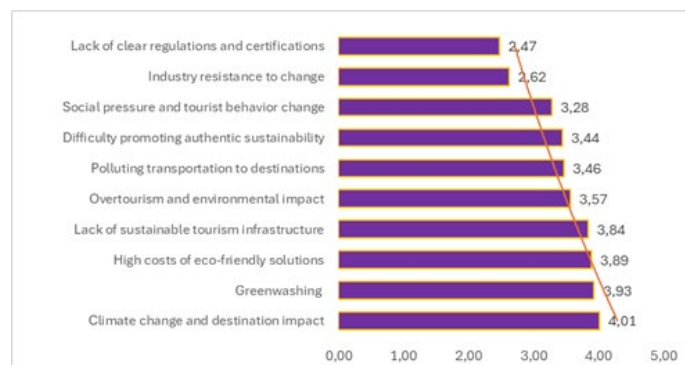


Chart 2. Ranking of problems according to the weighted

Closely following, *greenwashing* emerged as a major concern (3.93), suggesting a growing critical awareness among tourists who are increasingly skeptical and discerning about eco-marketing claims. The feeling of being misled or deprived of transparent information erodes consumer trust and complicates the ability to make responsible travel choices.

Additional high scores were reported for the *lack of sustainable infrastructure* (3.84) and the high cost of eco-friendly solutions (3.89). These results indicate the existence of significant practical barriers to adopting more responsible travel behaviors. Respondents emphasized the difficulty of accessing facilities and services that support sustainable travel—such as green public transportation, affordable eco-lodging options, or proper waste management infrastructure. Financial constraints were cited as a key obstacle, hindering both tourists and tourism providers from adopting sustainable practices on a scale. Green solutions are often perceived as expensive, which may discourage sustainable decision-making.

Moreover, the *difficulty of promoting authentic sustainability* (3.44) highlights a notable challenge in effectively communicating genuine sustainability efforts. Tourists may express skepticism or confusion when faced with “green” marketing messages, making it difficult for truly sustainable initiatives to be recognized and appreciated. Nonetheless, there is a growing awareness among tourists of their potential role in promoting sustainability through informed and responsible choices.

Social pressure and the desire to engage in more responsible behavior are increasingly influential factors (3.28). The relatively high mean scores for awareness of the negative impacts of over-tourism (3.57) and transportation on the environment and local culture suggest that tourists either do not perceive viable alternatives or are unwilling to compromise on destination, comfort, or travel costs.

Overall, respondents appear to be neither directly affected by nor fully aware of the lack of clear standards within the sustainable tourism industry (2.47). The low rating attributed to this issue may reflect either a lack of knowledge or a perception that the absence of clear standards does not have an immediate impact on their travel experience. Consequently, tourists do not perceive substantial resistance from the industry toward sustainable practices, which is reflected in the similarly low ranking of Industry resistance to change (2.62). This perception may be explained by the observation of isolated sustainability initiatives or by a general lack of information regarding the broader sector’s efforts—or lack thereof—to undergo systemic transformation. Nevertheless, industry inertia and resistance to change can slow the large-scale adoption of sustainable solutions, while the absence of clear standards complicates the differentiation between genuinely sustainable offerings and those that merely claim to be.

The overall mean score across all assessed issues was 3.45 out of 5, indicating a relatively high level of concern among tourists regarding these matters. The highest mean scores were assigned to issues related to climate change and greenwashing, suggesting that tourists are aware of environmental risks and are cautious about misleading claims of sustainability. However, respondents demonstrated limited understanding of the structural mechanisms underpinning the tourism industry’s transition toward sustainability, leading to the relative minimization of concerns such as the legislative framework and responsible behavior.

An additional analysis examined the distribution of respondents' ratings for each issue within their respective rankings (Chart 3). For issues perceived as highly important (ranked first and second), more than half of the participants (52% and 60%, respectively) assigned the maximum score of 5. Notably, these issues exhibited a bimodal distribution, with a significant secondary group assigning a score of 2, indicating a certain polarization of public perception into two distinct perspectives. Conversely, the Lack of clear regulations and certifications and Industry resistance to change were perceived as least important, with 65% and 58% of responses, respectively, concentrated at the lowest scores (1 and 2). Although not directly assessed through specific survey questions, “eco-anxiety” can be inferred from the scores assigned to issues related to environmental impact and sustainability. To explore the relationship between the importance attributed to these issues and the previously determined average level of eco-anxiety, we calculated the Pearson correlation coefficient using the following formula:

$$r = \frac{\sum[(X - \bar{X})(Y - \bar{Y})]}{\sqrt{\sum[(X - \bar{X})^2] \sum[(Y - \bar{Y})^2]}}$$

where: X -Average Importance Score; Y Average Eco-Anxiety Level; \bar{X} average of the values X; \bar{Y} average of the values Y.

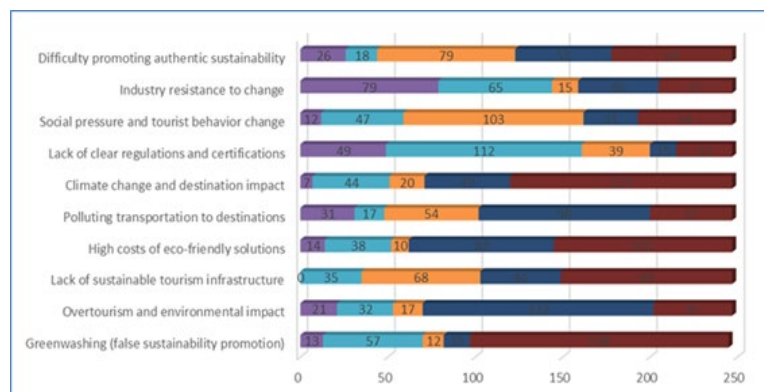


Chart 3. Complete distribution of responses for each problem, maintaining the same order

The relationship between various issues affecting the tourism industry and the average level of eco-anxiety reveals several significant trends (table no.2). The strongest association—a moderate correlation of 0.42—was observed between *Climate change and its impact on destinations*.

Table no. 2. Relationship between eco-anxiety and importance of sustainable tourism issues

| Issues | \bar{X} | \bar{Y} | r | Interpretation |
|---|-----------|-----------|------|---------------------------------|
| Greenwashing (false sustainability promotion) | 3.93 | 2.74 | 0,22 | Weak positive correlation |
| Overtourism and environmental impact | 3.57 | | 0.16 | Very weak positive correlation |
| Lack of sustainable tourism infrastructure | 3.84 | | 0.19 | Very weak positive correlation |
| High costs of eco-friendly solutions | 3.89 | | 0.05 | No significant correlation |
| Polluting transportation to destinations | 3.46 | | 0.13 | Very weak positive correlation. |
| Climate change and destination impact | 4.01 | | 0.42 | Moderate positive correlation |
| Lack of clear regulations and certifications | 2.47 | | 0.24 | Weak positive correlation |
| Social pressure and tourist behavior change | 3.28 | | 0.24 | Weak positive correlation. |
| Industry resistance to change | 2.62 | | 0.19 | Very weak positive correlation |
| Difficulty promoting authentic sustainability | 3.44 | | 0.30 | Weak positive correlation. |

This result was expected, given the growing visibility of climate change effects on popular destinations (e.g., wildfires, floods, earthquakes, destruction of coral reefs), which act as direct triggers for eco-anxiety. The *Difficulty in promoting genuine sustainability* shows a weak but notable correlation (0.30) with eco-anxiety, suggesting that the authenticity of sustainability marketing communications is meaningfully linked to consumers' ecological anxiety. This finding highlights the need for greater transparency and credibility in marketing messages. *Lack of clear regulations and certifications* and *Social pressure and behavioral change among tourists* both show weak correlations (0.24), indicating that regulatory uncertainty and social dynamics exert a similar, though moderate, impact on eco-anxiety levels.

Interestingly, *Greenwashing*, despite receiving a high importance score (3.93), shows only a weak correlation (0.22) with eco-anxiety. This suggests that although the issue is widely recognized as important, its direct influence on ecological anxiety is less pronounced than might have been anticipated. Similarly intriguing is the case of *High costs of eco-friendly solutions*, which shows no significant correlation (0.05) with eco-anxiety, despite being rated as highly important (3.89). This finding suggests that although financial aspects are critical for the implementation of sustainability initiatives, they do not directly affect tourists' psychological states related to environmental concerns. Issues such as *Polluting transportation to destinations*, *Overtourism and its environmental impact*, and *Lack of sustainable tourism infrastructure* all exhibit very weak correlations with eco-anxiety. This indicates that, while these problems are considered of moderate importance, their direct contribution to ecological anxiety is extremely limited.

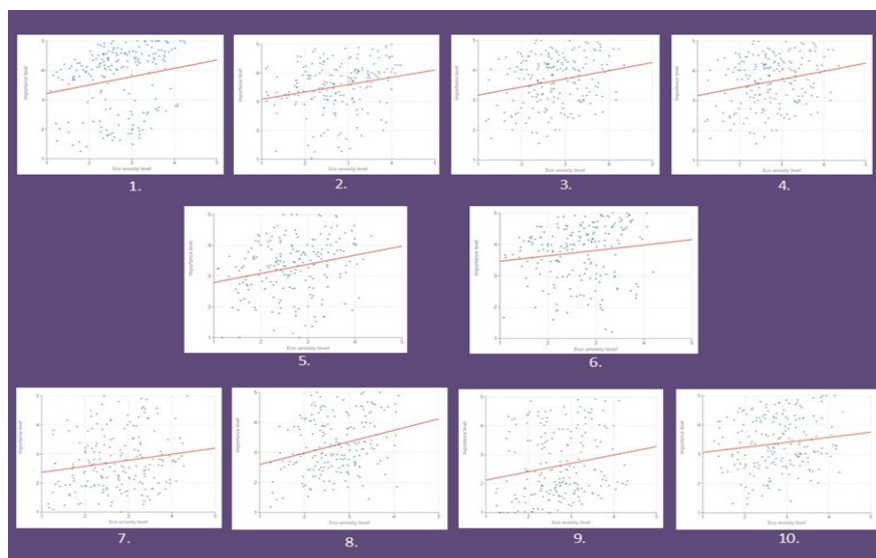


Figure no. 1. Relationship between eco-anxiety levels and the perceived importance of sustainable tourism issues (The issues are presented from 1 to 10, as in Table no. 2.)

To better understand these correlations, scatter plots were generated, mapping eco-anxiety scores on the horizontal axis and issue importance (ranked from 1 to 10) on the vertical axis (Figure no.1). The analysis of the scatter plots further supports the findings previously discussed. Scatter plots 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, and 10 exhibit a weak or very weak positive correlation between eco-anxiety and the perceived importance of various issues.

The widespread dispersion of data points around the regression line indicates that participants with low, medium, or high levels of eco-anxiety may attribute similar levels of importance to the same issue, suggesting a lack of strong differentiation based on emotional factors alone. The regression line's minimal upward inclination confirms that increases in eco-anxiety are not systematically associated with higher perceived importance across these issues. In contrast, scatter plots 5, 6, and 8 reveal a slight tendency toward a weak-to-moderate positive correlation, implying that higher eco-anxiety may, in some cases, lead to assigning greater importance to specific sustainability concerns. However, the significant variability among respondents indicates that this pattern is neither robust nor generalizable.

Overall, the absence of strong linear relationships suggests that eco-anxiety operates more as a diffuse emotional background rather than a direct, issue-specific driver of concern. Emotional responses such as eco-anxiety, while influential at a general level, do not consistently predict cognitive prioritization of individual sustainability issues within tourism. For example, despite a high importance score, High costs of eco-friendly solutions showed virtually no meaningful correlation ($r = 0.05$) with eco-anxiety, highlighting the complexity of the emotion-cognition dynamic. These findings emphasize that the importance attributed to sustainability issues is shaped by multiple factors beyond emotional disposition, such as personal experiences, information availability, value systems, and the perceived relevance of each issue. Consequently, while statistically significant correlations may arise due to the relatively large sample size ($n = 247$), their practical significance appears limited.

In conclusion, the research hypotheses were only partially confirmed: although a relationship between eco-anxiety and issue prioritization exists, it is generally weak and inconsistent across the range of problems analyzed. This calls for a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms linking emotional and cognitive dimensions in sustainable tourism behavior. Future research should further investigate mediating variables, such as knowledge levels, trust in information sources, and personal exposure to environmental risks, to better explain the observed variability.

Conclusions

The analysis of the collected data revealed that the research hypotheses are only partially supported. While certain correlations were identified between the average level of eco-anxiety and the perceived ranking of issues facing destination marketing, these associations are generally weak and inconsistent. This suggests that eco-anxiety, as a generalized emotional response to environmental threats, does not necessarily translate into a differentiated or systematic evaluation of each specific issue analyzed in this study. Therefore, while eco-anxiety is indeed present among respondents and plays a role in shaping perceptions of sustainability, it cannot be considered a direct or consistent predictor of how tourism marketing challenges are prioritized. These findings highlight the complexity of the relationship between affective dimensions (such as anxiety) and cognitive evaluations (such as the perceived importance of problems), emphasizing the need for interdisciplinary approaches and more refined measurement tools in future research. Tourism destination marketing strategies should consider the need for authentic, transparent communication tailored to the target audience's level of knowledge and value system, rather than the superficial use of ecological discourse as a decorative element.

The use of self-reported measures and a non-standardized eco-anxiety scale may affect the reliability and generalizability of the findings. The sample, while diverse, was limited to 247 respondents primarily from urban areas, potentially introducing demographic bias. Additionally, the cross-sectional design cannot capture the evolution of eco-anxiety over time. Future studies should incorporate longitudinal data, validated psychological instruments, and a broader geographic representation to better assess the complex relationship between emotional states and sustainability-related tourist behaviors. Also the influence of other variables, such as environmental education, institutional trust, or personal experiences with sustainable tourism, should be explored.

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