

From Spectator to Stakeholder: How Tourists Perceive Their Agency in Sustainable Tourism Development in an Island Destination

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Amid growing awareness of environmental and social responsibility, many tourists seek travel experiences that reflect their values. Sustainable tourism promotes a balance between development and the need to address evolving environmental and societal challenges. Grounded in Stakeholder Theory, this study explores how tourists perceive sustainable tourism and their role in supporting it. Forty-seven semi-structured interviews and observations with tourists in Phuket were thematically analysed. Five interrelated themes emerged: perceived limits of individual impact, sustainability as a trend, green destination branding and authenticity, situated ethics in tourism behaviour, and cultural variety in sustainability perspectives. While most participants endorsed sustainable tourism in principle, their engagement remained largely symbolic, shaped by uncertainty and context-dependent ethics. The findings reveal a gap between attitudes and meaningful action, emphasizing the need for clearer infrastructure, credible communication, and culturally sensitive engagement strategies. This study contributes to understanding tourists as stakeholders and informs efforts to enhance destination-level sustainability.

Keywords: environmental awareness, nature-based tourism, visitor perceptions, sustainability: sustainable tourism development, pro-environmental behaviour



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Introduction

Around the world, popular tourist destinations are grappling with the consequences of their own success, and Phuket Island stands as a striking example of how rapid tourism development can outpace sustainable planning (Seyfi et al., 2024; Gössling & Scott, 2024). The rapid development of Phuket Island as a mass-tourism destination has led to several growth-related challenges, including the destruction of much of the island's original ecosystem (Jirapornvaree et al., 2023), a lack of affordable housing, infrastructure deficiencies (Božić et al., 2018), strain on social structures and local culture – such as increased

crime and rising social inequality (Tuntipisitkul et al., 2021) – and weak institutional and policy support (Fuchs, 2023). These challenges illustrate the broader risk that, while strategies to increase tourism arrivals can generate revenue, they may also produce significant environmental and social costs if growth is not effectively managed over the long term (Adebayo et al., 2023).

A key step in addressing growth-related challenges is developing an understanding of how visitors perceive the quality of their destination experience, including the level of protection of the environment, visitor satisfaction, and intention to return (Rasooli-

manesh et al., 2025). The way an individual perceives whether a tourist destination meets their needs results from a complex set of interactions. These interactions involve how the destination is organized, how it enables tourist participation in experiences, and how individuals evaluate the success – or failure – of those interactions (Reitsamer & Brunner-Sperdin, 2017). Cracolici and Nijkamp (2009) describe this process as the ability of a destination to generate a feeling of ‘tourist well-being’. Essentially, visitor perceptions provide useful insights into how well a destination is achieving the destination experience desired by its visitors (Gorji et al., 2023). The importance of examining visitor perceptions has been highlighted by a number of scholars including Joo et al. (2019) and Streimikiene et al. (2021).

To situate these visitor perceptions within broader governance and responsibility structures, this study adopts Stakeholder Theory as its primary theoretical framework, with particular attention to tourists as destination stakeholders. A key element of efforts to enhance the sustainability of tourism is the need to refocus the attention of industry stakeholders toward balanced development, while continuously adapting to changing conditions (Hall, 2019; Moyle et al., 2020). Recognition of the importance of considering the views and concerns of all stakeholders – including tourists – supports the use of Stakeholder Theory (ST) as the underpinning theoretical framework for evaluating sustainable tourism development (Song et al., 2021). A tourism stakeholder is defined as ‘any group or individual who can affect or is affected by’ tourism development in an area (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Byrd (2007) further emphasized that stakeholder participation should not only address the needs of current stakeholders, but also ‘take into consideration the needs, requirements, and perspectives of present and future visitors’ (p. 8).

While definitions of tourism stakeholders vary across the literature (Byrd, 2007; Song et al., 2021; Fuchs & Konar, 2025), a consensus has emerged around five primary groups: the industry, residents, tourists, government, and non-governmental organizations (UNWTO, 2025). Although ST originated in the business and management fields, it has since been

adopted by a number of tourism and leisure scholars, including Byrd (2007), Poudel et al. (2016), Song et al. (2021), and Fuchs and Konar (2025). The significance of including tourists as stakeholders has also been formally recognized by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (n.d.). Given the critical role stakeholder support plays in the success of sustainable tourism development (Wondirad et al., 2020), ST provides a valuable framework for shaping research questions, guiding data collection and analysis, and interpreting findings.

This theoretical framing is applied in a destination setting where sustainability has become both a strategic priority and a practical challenge. Destinations, such as Phuket Island, have expressed a strong commitment to sustainable development, seeking to position themselves as responsible and environmentally conscious tourism hubs (Tuntipisitkul et al., 2021). With the rise of environmentally aware travellers, destinations targeting this segment must be prepared to offer experiences that align with visitors’ ecological values and ethical expectations (Ruhanen & Bowles, 2020; Fuchs & Konar, 2025).

In this context, understanding how tourists perceive sustainability at the destination level becomes crucial – not only for enhancing visitor satisfaction but also for advancing broader goals of sustainable tourism development (Streimikiene et al., 2021). Moreover, tourist perceptions can serve as early indicators of whether sustainability efforts are perceived as credible, performative, or insufficient (Song et al., 2021). As such, they are essential for informing adaptive management and effective policy responses. Therefore, including tourists in stakeholder analyses allows for a more comprehensive understanding of both demand-side expectations and their alignment with supply-side strategies (Wondirad et al., 2020).

At present, the literature provides limited empirical insights into the views of tourists as stakeholders, despite their pivotal role in shaping sustainable tourism practices (Hall, 2019). Consequently, Phuket Island was selected as the study site due to its reputation as a nature-based destination with a growing focus on sustainability (Fuchs, 2023). It is Thailand’s largest island, with a land area of 543 km² – somewhat smaller

than Singapore (728.6 km²) and about half the size of Okinawa, Japan (1,199 km²). Located in the Andaman Sea, Phuket is often referred to as the 'Pearl of the Andaman' (Duerrast, 2011). Despite being Thailand's second-smallest province, it contributes substantially to the national gross domestic product (GDP). This dual identity – as both an economic engine and an ecologically sensitive area – makes Phuket a compelling case for examining the relationship between sustainable development and tourist perceptions through the lens of Stakeholder Theory.

Within this context, tourists play a central role in shaping sustainability outcomes, yet their perspectives remain insufficiently examined in empirical research. Despite the fact that tourists are primary consumers of tourism services – and their behaviours directly affect sustainability outcomes – most stakeholder-based analyses continue to overlook their perspectives. Moreover, while the environment is a major attraction, research on sustainable tourism development in nature-based island destinations remains very limited, highlighting both theoretical and practical gaps in the existing literature (Ruhanen & Bowles, 2020; Fuchs & Konar, 2025; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2025).

This study offers a novel lens by positioning tourists not merely as consumers or passive beneficiaries but as potential agents of change whose values, expectations, and situational ethics shape the operationalization of sustainability on the ground. Similar studies in different contexts have identified significant issues that are explored in the present study. For example, Wondirad et al. (2020) examined the status of ecotourism development in Southern Ethiopia using an exploratory research design based on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with a range of stakeholders. The results indicated that educating tourists by demonstrating sustainable practices is essential to developing sustainable tourism.

Moreover, the authors observed that understanding the relationship between stakeholder groups should be included as an essential element in the planning and management of tourist destinations. The study emphasized that stakeholder involvement must go beyond consultation and that collaboration is needed to effectively develop sustainable tourism

practices (Wondirad et al., 2020). While much of the sustainability discourse in tourism emphasizes supply-side strategies, there is growing recognition that tourist perspectives are equally important (Li et al., 2024). Earlier research has long highlighted the challenges of translating pro-environmental attitudes into consistent tourist behaviour, with studies emphasizing issues such as the attitude-behaviour gap, situational constraints, and limited tourist agency well before sustainability became a mainstream policy concern (e.g. Dolnicar & Leisch, 2008; Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014). Yet, tourists' voices remain underrepresented in empirical studies (Chen & Zhao, 2025). To address this gap, the research reported in this paper first investigated tourists' perceptions of destination sustainability and associated practices in Phuket Island. It then explored their views on how they may contribute to enhancing destination sustainability.

In this study, a broad definition of destination sustainability was adopted based on the three pillars of preservation of environmental resources, support for the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, and the maintenance of economically feasible long-term operations. The outcome of the research provides insights into how perception studies can be used by destinations to identify gaps between visitor expectations of sustainability and their actual experiences. The study also highlights a gap between visitors' views on desirable actions and observed actions. To address these research aims and capture tourists' perspectives in depth, a qualitative research design was adopted, as outlined in the following section.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore tourists' perceptions of sustainable tourism and their behavioural responses within a destination setting. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research and the need to generate in-depth insights into participants' values, attitudes, and observed behaviours – elements not easily captured through quantitative methods alone (Wilson et al., 2020; Truong et al., 2020). Qualitative designs are especially valuable in

tourism research when seeking to understand stakeholder perspectives on complex and context-dependent phenomena such as sustainability (Helgadóttir et al., 2019). To capture both what tourists reported and what they did, the study employed two complementary methods: semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. Interviews enabled open-ended exploration of tourists' sustainability perceptions, while observations assessed how these translated into on-site behaviours (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Together, these methods provided a more holistic understanding of the alignment – or disconnect – between stated attitudes and actual practices, a central concern in sustainability behaviour research.

Data Collection

Study participants were recruited using purposeful sampling, described as 'a form of non-probability sampling in which researchers rely on their judgment when choosing members of the population to participate in their study' (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 172). Recruitment commenced with an informal discussion with potential participants, during which initial probing questions were used to determine the person's willingness to share information, level of articulation (and basic competency with the English language), and prior knowledge of sustainable tourism. The interviews were guided by questions not limited to but including 'What is your understanding of sustainable tourism?', 'How can sustainable tourism impact tourists in Phuket?', 'What is your opinion about environmental sustainability in Phuket?', and 'How can tourists be responsible for environmentally sustainable behaviour in Phuket?'. Written consent was obtained prior to the interviews, which were audio recorded with the participants' permission.

Participants were informed of their voluntary participation and that they could withdraw at any time. Moreover, data collection was carried out in multiple phases between late 2024 and early 2025 to account for potential seasonal variation in tourist behaviour and perceptions. A total of 62 semi-structured interviews were conducted, yielding approximately 28 hours of recorded audio. Of these, 47 interviews were retained for analysis; the remaining interviews were excluded

due to insufficient data quality or lack of relevance to the research questions. The principle of thematic saturation was applied to determine the adequacy of the sample size, in line with established qualitative research standards (Fusch & Ness, 2015). To complement the interview data, covert non-participant observations were conducted in the same locations where participants were recruited, including beaches, accommodation areas, transport hubs, and tourism activity sites.

The purpose of the observations was not to quantify behaviour, but to document observable sustainability-related actions and contextual conditions that could support or contradict participants' stated attitudes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Becker, 2017; Reinharz, 2017). Observational attention focused on behaviours such as waste disposal practices, use of reusable versus single-use items, engagement with environmentally framed signage or infrastructure (e.g. recycling bins), and participation in tourism activities with explicit sustainability claims. Field notes were recorded immediately after observation periods to capture behavioural patterns, situational constraints, and contextual cues influencing action. In total, approximately 22 hours of non-participant observation were conducted across multiple sites during the data collection period.

Data Analysis

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim under the principle of confidentiality. The transcribed interviews were analysed thematically using an inductive open-coding approach based on good practice (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The researchers first familiarized themselves with the data and then generated keywords and codes. Manual coding was employed instead of software to enable the researchers to develop a deeper understanding of the data. Transcripts were re-read and organized into potential sub-themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Another check was undertaken to ensure consistency among codes before the formation of a thematic map. A thematic map was used as a visualization guide in the presentation of the results (Braun et al., 2022) and compared with the field notes collected during the observations.

Table 1 Excerpt from the Data Analysis Showing the Emergence of Several Subthemes from the Verbatim Report, Which Collectively Formed the First Theme of the Research

Theme	Subtheme	Verbatim report
Perceived limits of individual impact	Symbolic participation	‘I recycle and carry my own water bottle, but beyond that, I’m not sure what difference I can make here.’ ‘I always bring my reusable bag or refuse to take a plastic straw.’
	Short-term tourist mindset	‘Honestly, I think it’s the government or the hotels who should do more. I’m just here for two weeks.’
	Doubt about impact	‘Even if I try, I don’t think it changes much. There’s too much going wrong already.’ ‘I want to help but I don’t know how. It’s not obvious what I can do as a tourist.’
	Lack of clarity	‘I’d probably do more if I knew what the rules were here. Like, where’s the recycling?’
	Moral disengagement	‘It’s not really my job to fix things here. I’m a guest, not a manager.’

In the final step, the main themes were identified and labelled, resulting in the themes presented in the paper (Table 1).

All coding and thematic analysis were conducted by the author, with support from graduate research assistants who assisted with data preparation and organizational tasks. To ensure analytical rigour and consistency, the coding process followed an iterative and reflexive approach, involving repeated engagement with the data, continuous comparison across transcripts, and systematic refinement of codes and themes. Analytical decisions were documented throughout the process, and emerging interpretations were continually checked against the full dataset to ensure coherence and credibility.

Observational data were analysed alongside interview transcripts to support methodological triangulation. Specifically, observations were used to assess the alignment between tourists’ expressed sustainability values and their on-site behaviours, allowing for the identification of consistencies and discrepancies between stated intentions and observed actions. These comparisons informed the interpretation of themes related to symbolic participation, situational ethics, and perceived limits of individual impact, strengthening the credibility of the findings by grounding self-reported accounts in observed practice.

Results and Analysis

The analysis of 47 in-depth interviews and accompanying non-participant observations revealed a nuanced landscape of tourist perceptions and behaviours related to sustainability. This section presents five core themes that emerged from the data: (1) perceived limits of individual impact, (2) sustainability as a trend, (3) green destination branding and authenticity, (4) situated ethics in tourism behaviour, and (5) cultural variety in sustainable tourism perspectives. Together, these themes offer insight into the complex interplay between attitudes, expectations, and actions among tourists visiting Phuket Island, and illustrate both the opportunities and constraints of treating tourists as active stakeholders in destination sustainability. The relationships between these themes and their underlying subthemes are visually summarized in Figure 1.

Characteristics of the Sample

The final sample ($n=47$) comprised approximately two-thirds of respondents (30 participants, 64%) from European countries, including but not limited to German-speaking tourists (13 participants, 28%), followed by those from the United Kingdom (7 participants, 15%), Scandinavia (5 participants, 11%), and Russia (2 participants, 4%). The remaining 17 participants were from North America (6 participants, 13%), Oceania (5 participants, 11%), East Asia (2 participants, 4%),

Central America (2 participants, 4%), and the Middle East (2 participants, 4%). The gender distribution was slightly skewed, with 26 female participants (55%) and 21 male participants (45%). The majority of participants had visited Thailand previously (64%), while the remaining 36% were on their first visit. Approximately two-thirds of the participants held at least a bachelor's degree. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 64 years, with a mean age of 27.3 years.

Theme 1: Perceived Limits of Individual Impact

Many participants expressed support for sustainable tourism but felt their individual actions had little real impact. Common behaviours – like using reusable bottles or avoiding plastic straws – were framed as symbolic gestures rather than meaningful contributions. These behaviours were commonly described as ‘small steps’ or ‘the least I can do’, and were accompanied by a sense of resignation or uncertainty about what else could be done.

I recycle and carry my own water bottle, but beyond that, I'm not sure what difference I can make here. [Female, 34, United Kingdom]

Honestly, I think it's the government or the hotels who should do more. I'm just here for two weeks – what can I really change? [Male, 29, Germany]

Some participants expressed frustration over the lack of visible systems or guidance, which contributed to a feeling of helplessness. The absence of clear information – such as recycling bins, eco-labels, or signage – led several interviewees to disengage entirely, despite their interest in supporting sustainable practices.

I'd probably do more if I knew what the rules were here. Like, where's the recycling? Are these tours actually eco-friendly or just saying that? Back home I try to be really conscious, but here I just go with the flow. I don't even know if it would make a difference. [Female, 40, Australia]

A smaller number of participants emphasized personal limitations such as lack of time, knowledge, or confidence in identifying legitimate sustainable op-

tions. Even when aware of sustainable alternatives, some expressed uncertainty about their credibility or effectiveness, further weakening their motivation to act. Across interviews, the overarching sentiment was that individual responsibility was acknowledged, but rarely extended beyond low-effort behaviours.

Theme 2: Sustainability as a Trend

For many participants, sustainability was expressed more as a lifestyle identity than a deeply informed commitment. While interviewees frequently claimed to ‘care about the environment’ or ‘do their part’, their descriptions of sustainable behaviour often focused on externally visible actions, for example, staying at eco-certified hotels or choosing organic food when available, rather than long-term engagement. Observing these behaviours appeared to serve a performative or image-driven function, offering a sense of social alignment with current norms.

I chose the eco-friendly resort because it had a badge on the website. It just feels good to support that kind of thing. It's kind of what many of my friends do now. [Male, 42, France]

I always bring my reusable bag or refuse to take a plastic straw. Back home, all my friends try to be eco-conscious, so it becomes part of your routine. I just continued that here. [Female, 28, Sweden]

While not insincere, these statements often lacked depth in terms of understanding local sustainability challenges or practices. For many, being ‘sustainable’ was about expressing personal values rather than engaging critically with destination-specific issues. Sustainability was framed as a trend or virtue signal, bundled with wellness, ethical consumption, and a sense of ‘being a good tourist’. Several participants also admitted that these practices were habitual or even fashionable, shaped more by what others around them were doing than by internal motivation. The theme reveals a subtle tension: while the mainstreaming of sustainability has made certain behaviours more common, it may also have diluted their meaning.

Theme 3: Green Destination Branding and Authenticity

A strong theme emerging from the interviews was the disconnect between destination branding and on-the-ground reality. While many participants were initially drawn to Phuket due to its marketed image as a tropical, eco-friendly island, their actual experiences often led to doubts about the authenticity of its sustainability claims. Participants repeatedly referred to websites, brochures, or booking platforms that used terms such as 'green', 'eco', or 'sustainable', yet expressed scepticism once they arrived.

The hotel I booked had a green label, but there were plastic bottles everywhere and no recycling bins. It felt like a gimmick. It's hard to know what's real. Everyone wants to look green now, but who checks these things? [Female, 38, Netherlands]

If the island wants to be green, that's great – but don't put it on me to figure out who's lying and who's real. [Male, 52, United States]

This perceived greenwashing created a sense of disillusionment, especially among tourists who had actively tried to make more responsible choices. Several noted that eco-certifications or 'green badges' on booking platforms lacked transparency or credibility, making it difficult to distinguish between genuine efforts and performative branding. This inconsistency between messaging and experience led some tourists to feel misled, while others became more passive in their sustainability efforts. A few even expressed frustration, stating that the burden of navigating these inconsistencies was 'not their responsibility' as guests. In contrast, some participants were more forgiving, viewing the branding as aspirational rather than deceptive. These tourists acknowledged gaps between rhetoric and reality but interpreted them as part of an ongoing process of improvement.

Theme 4: Situated Ethics in Tourism Behaviour

Many participants described a noticeable shift in their sustainability-related behaviours while on holiday, often lowering their usual standards with a sense of justification. This theme captures how ethical consid-

erations are relaxed in the context of vacation, framed as temporary exceptions to everyday values. Several tourists openly admitted that they would act differently at home, but viewed travel as a circumstance to take a break from responsibility.

At home, I'm more strict – like, I sort my waste properly and all that. But here I'm on holiday, and I don't want to think about it too much. It's not the same as being at home. You can't expect tourists to behave the same way when they're trying to relax and have fun. [Male, 30, Austria]

I try to be green when I can, but it's not always possible when travelling. You just have to do your best and not stress about it. [Female, 27, Germany]

The 'I'm on holiday' rationale was used to justify a range of behaviours, from choosing less eco-friendly transportation to ignoring recycling opportunities or visiting animal attractions they might avoid at home. Interestingly, some participants appeared to experience mild discomfort about this inconsistency, acknowledging a gap between values and actions, yet often brushing it off as unavoidable. For others, there was no perceived contradiction at all – holiday settings were viewed as fundamentally different moral spaces. This theme also revealed a tendency to shift responsibility away from the individual and toward the context. The absence of clear environmental options was frequently used as a reason for disengagement. While sustainability was rarely dismissed outright, it was often deprioritized in favour of personal convenience, enjoyment, or perceived limitations within the destination setting.

Theme 5: Cultural Variety in Sustainable Tourism Perspectives

Tourists' perceptions of sustainability and their willingness to act on it were shaped not only by personal values but also by broader cultural and sociodemographic backgrounds. Participants from different countries and regions often emphasized varying aspects of sustainability – some focused more on environmental protection, while others prioritized social

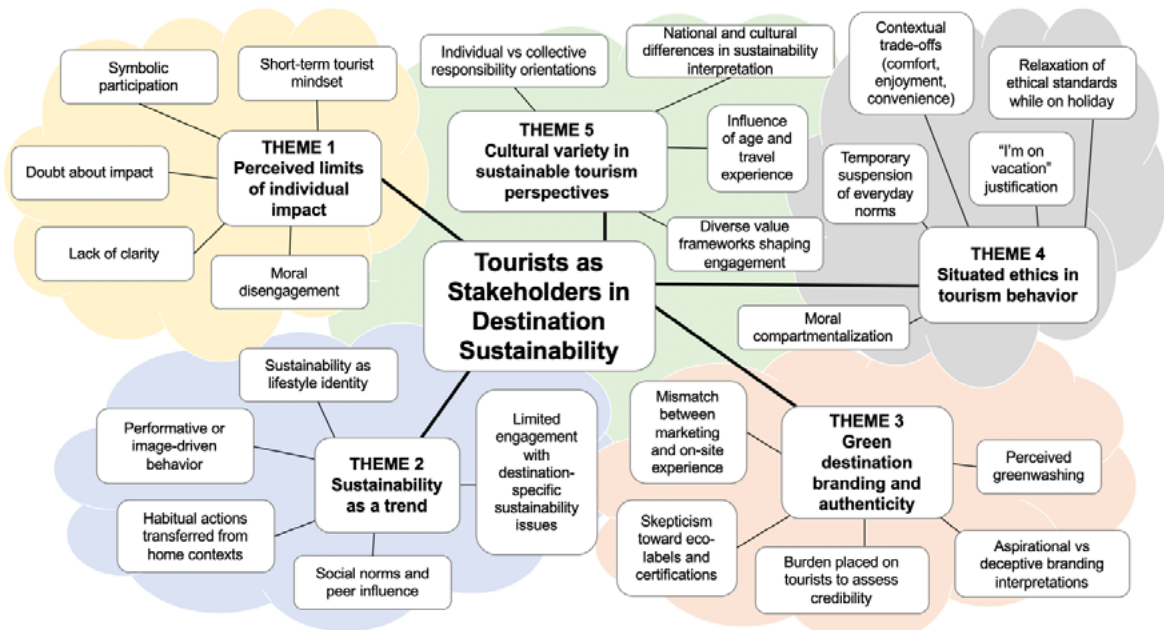


Figure 1 Thematic Map Illustrating the Five Interrelated Themes Shaping Tourists' Perceptions of Sustainability and Their Agency as Stakeholders in Phuket Island

justice, ethical consumption, or local community support.

In Germany, we're raised to think about waste and climate from a young age. So when I travel, I naturally look for green options. I care about animals and nature, but I also think helping local people is a big part of sustainability. Like, buying from street vendors instead of big chains. [Female, 38, Germany]

In some cases, cultural background influenced not just what participants considered sustainable, but how much they felt responsible for. Western tourists, particularly from Europe, tended to emphasize individual responsibility. Meanwhile, several participants from North America or Oceania described sustainability as something more collective, often dependent on government, industry, or community action rather than personal behaviour alone.

In the us, the government and companies take the lead. As a tourist, I follow what's provided.

If there are no clear options, I assume it's not expected. [Male, 42, United States]

Interestingly, age and travel experience also played a role. Younger participants, especially those identifying as digital nomads or long-term travellers, often expressed stronger views on ethical tourism and sustainability – though not always matched by action. Older travellers, while sometimes less familiar with sustainability terminology, often drew on values of respect, moderation, and low-impact living. Overall, this theme emphasizes that sustainability is not a universal concept with a single meaning or mode of practice. Instead, it is interpreted through the lens of cultural identity and life experience.

Discussion and implications

This study set out to explore how tourists perceive and negotiate their role in sustainable tourism on Phuket Island, revealing important tensions between values, behaviours, and the broader structural context of tourism consumption. Tourists in this study consistently expressed broad support for sustainability, yet

their engagement remained superficial or situational. While almost all participants were aware of the benefits stemming from sustainable tourism practices, it was apparent that not all observed or stated behaviours were governed by a desire to adhere to the principles of sustainable actions. While most respondents emphasized the importance of sustainable tourism, less than ten reported actively seeking opportunities that support the sustainable development of tourism during their vacation. This discrepancy between awareness and action identified a need to further explore the factors that hinder or motivate tourists to actively engage in sustainable behaviours.

Moreover, these findings highlight what several scholars have identified as the persistent and well-documented 'attitude-behaviour gap' in sustainable tourism (Tölkes, 2020; Wut et al., 2023; Viglia & Acuti, 2023; Fuchs & Konar, 2025), where pro-environmental values fail to translate into consistent actions. It also highlights the hidden role that social desirability bias may have played in the findings reported by previous research into actual behaviours versus self-reported behaviours (McNamara & Prideaux, 2010). In an era where there is increasing recognition of the importance of protecting the environment and promoting community well-being, developing effective policies and regulations has become an important driver in supporting sustainable tourism (Maxim, 2016). The results of this study are consistent with the findings from other studies (Maxim, 2016; Paunović & Jovanović, 2017; Graci & Van Vliet, 2020; Buijendijk & Eijgelaar, 2022) which emphasize that although policymakers acknowledge the need for sustainable tourism, implementation is often limited in practice.

Vellecco and Mancino (2010) reason that sustainable tourism policies are difficult to implement due to the lack of shared responsibility. Graci and Van Vliet (2020) add that stakeholder education and participation are critical for the successful implementation of practices that support sustainable tourism development. While previous findings report from diverse contexts, their implications resonate with the challenges observed and faced by Phuket. They also provide insights that apply to the implementation of policies and affirm three key issues: the need for effective

policy-making, the provision of opportunities to act sustainably, and the need for a deeper understanding of the potential role to be played by the supply side in promoting sustainable tourism. Several participants advocated a demand-driven approach, where tourists play an active role in shaping sustainable tourism practices.

The existing body of literature supports the idea that sustainable practices at destinations significantly impact the decision-making process of travellers (Bonzanigo et al., 2016; Seyfi et al., 2021; Seyedabolghasemi et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2023), indicating the need to have a detailed understanding of the views of tourists in relation to their expectations. Another critical insight that emerged is the role of uncertainty and ambiguity in shaping tourists' limited engagement. The absence of visible infrastructure (e.g. recycling bins), credible eco-labels, or clear behavioural cues appeared to diminish tourists' willingness to act. This highlights the role of destination management organizations in shaping sustainable behaviour not only through education but through environmental design and signalling (Line et al., 2018; Su et al., 2023). Echoing findings from Rasoolimanesh et al. (2025), the results point to a lack of functional systems that allow tourists to enact their values.

In this context, Stakeholder Theory proves especially useful. While ST has traditionally emphasized the role of residents, governments, and businesses, this study reinforces calls to recognize tourists as dynamic stakeholders – capable of influencing, and being influenced by, the sustainability trajectory of destinations (Wilkinson & Coles, 2024). Yet, many participants distanced themselves from this responsibility, invoking short-termism ('I'm only here for two weeks') or moral disengagement ('It's not my job to fix things'). Such deflections suggest that while tourists are formally stakeholders, they may not perceive themselves as such in practice – particularly in the absence of clear governance or participatory mechanisms. This perceived marginality within the stakeholder system reflects what Wondirad et al. (2020) described as the 'passive tourist paradigm', in which travellers view sustainability as an institutional obligation rather than a shared endeavour.

Adding further complexity, the findings revealed that tourism operates as a space of ethical exception for many. Participants openly admitted that their sustainability standards were relaxed while travelling – a phenomenon that has been theorized as ‘situated ethics’ (Jamal & Lee, 2020), where moral reasoning is adapted to fit the vacation context. In contrast to everyday life, where environmental responsibilities are internalized and habitual, tourism settings often foster a temporary moral release, justified by the pursuit of leisure, novelty, and escape. This temporal recalibration of values challenges assumptions embedded in many behavioural models that presume consistency across contexts. It also cautions against overly optimistic views of voluntarism in sustainability, calling for stronger institutional scaffolding to support pro-environmental behaviour even in transient leisure settings (Tsaur & Yen, 2023).

Importantly, this research also identified meaningful cultural variability in how sustainability is interpreted and enacted. Tourists from different socio-cultural backgrounds emphasized distinct dimensions of sustainability – ranging from environmental stewardship to ethical consumption and local economic justice. These findings support previous claims that sustainability is not a universally understood concept, but a construct filtered through national norms, education systems, and social values (Van Niekerk, 2020). They also imply that destination strategies must be culturally responsive, offering plural pathways for engagement rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all model. For instance, some visitors responded more to environmental cues, while others valued visible local benefit, suggesting that multi-pronged interventions may be more effective than standardized messaging.

The relatively high level of awareness of practices that support sustainable tourism, but inaction by many participants, suggests there is a need for education that emphasizes the importance of adopting sustainable tourism practices (Ehret et al., 2017; Niezgoda & Markiewicz, 2021). For both education and opportunities for visitors to engage in sustainable activities to be effective, tourists must have access to opportunities to participate in sustainable behaviours. For example, establishing partnerships with

local businesses and tour operators that promote and offer sustainable activities, such as eco-friendly tours or volunteering opportunities, can provide accessible avenues for tourists to actively participate in sustainable behaviours while on vacation (Kapera, 2018; Font et al., 2021). It may also be useful to develop strategies to incentivize and encourage tourists to continue their sustainable practices. This could include implementing recognition systems for tourists who actively engage in sustainable behaviours. Offering discounts to those who choose eco-friendly options or demonstrating responsible tourism practices is one option (Rawashdeh & Al-Ababneh, 2021; Rafiq et al., 2022).

Finally, the pervasive scepticism expressed toward green destination branding signals a growing awareness of greenwashing and the erosion of trust in sustainability communication. While participants appreciated the availability of eco-certified options, many doubted their authenticity, particularly when on-site experiences failed to align with marketed claims. This tension between aspirational branding and lived reality echoes broader debates on performative sustainability in tourism (Yang, 2025). The lack of transparency and third-party accountability mechanisms undermined tourists’ confidence, reinforcing passivity and even disillusionment. Yet, a minority of participants interpreted the inconsistencies as indicative of a transition process rather than deception – suggesting that some tourists are open to incremental change if communicated transparently.

Taken together, these findings suggest that unlocking tourists’ potential as sustainability stakeholders requires more than awareness campaigns or isolated behavioural nudges. It calls for integrative destination governance that recognizes tourists not only as consumers but as participants in a negotiated sustainability experience. This involves designing intuitive systems, cultivating trust through credible labelling and infrastructure, addressing context-specific ethical reasoning, and acknowledging cultural diversity in sustainability orientations. As destinations like Phuket continue to grapple with growth-related challenges, embracing the complexity of tourist perceptions – and their limitations – will be essential in moving toward genuinely sustainable tourism futures.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate tourists' perception towards sustainability and associated practices in Phuket and, secondly, to investigate tourists' views on how they can contribute to enhancing the destination's environmental sustainability. By foregrounding tourists as active, though ambivalent, stakeholders, this study extends Stakeholder Theory beyond its traditional supply-side orientation. Furthermore, the results support the need for ongoing analysis of tourists' perception of destination sustainability and their views on the key drivers for enhancing sustainability. The results indicate that tourists are likely to continue compromising their environmental standards and values if the destination fails to meet the standards of sustainability that visitors accept as the norm in their home countries. The findings from this study complement the literature by providing empirical evidence and practical examples of the challenges faced in implementing and monitoring sustainable tourism activities. Moreover, responding positively to this challenge is important if Phuket is to retain its status as a nature-based destination that is concerned about its environment. Achieving this will require industry stakeholders in the private and public sectors to adopt sustainable practices, collaborate with relevant authorities, prioritize the preservation of the destination's natural and cultural resources, and not be afraid of encouraging and responding to visitor feedback. It will also challenge destinations to view the demand side as a stakeholder who should not be ignored.

Limitations and Future Research

While the study adds to the literature related to tourists' perception towards sustainable tourism and their role as tourism stakeholders, it should be seen in context. Although the results are valid for the surveyed population, they might not be generalizable to an entire population, another industry, or a different geographical context. Moreover, the sample consisted of mostly international tourists from Western countries. The cultural beliefs and values of Asian cultures might differ and correspondingly lead to different results. Hence, the term 'tourists' should be interpreted in the context of Western tourists. To overcome some

of the limitations, research should be conducted in other locations, allowing for multinational comparison and identification of similarities and dissimilarities in perception and behaviour. Future research using quantitative methods will facilitate hypothesis testing of some of the findings that emerged from this research, including visitor willingness and the extent to which they will pay a premium price, beliefs versus actions, and the role of education in stated and observed behaviours. Future research and destination planning must move beyond awareness-building and toward structural facilitation – designing environments where sustainable behaviour becomes the intuitive, not exceptional, choice.

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