

Greenwashing Versus Genuine Sustainability: Consumer Trust in Eco-Tourism

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Abstract

The expansion of eco-tourism has been accompanied by growing concerns about greenwashing—the practice of making misleading environmental claims to attract sustainability-minded travellers. This study examines how perceived greenwashing and perceived genuine sustainability influence green trust, green scepticism, and repurchase intention among eco-tourists, with environmental knowledge serving as a moderating variable. An online survey was administered to 420 tourists who had visited eco-tourism destinations in Costa Rica, Thailand, or Kenya within the previous twelve months. Partial least squares structural equation modelling revealed that perceived greenwashing significantly increased green scepticism ($\beta = .52, p < .001$), which in turn reduced repurchase intention ($\beta = -.31, p < .001$). Conversely, perceived genuine sustainability strengthened green trust ($\beta = .48, p < .001$), which positively predicted repurchase intention ($\beta = .44, p < .001$). Environmental knowledge moderated the trust–repurchase relationship, with knowledgeable tourists exhibiting stronger loyalty when they perceived authenticity. The findings carry implications for destination marketing organisations, eco-certification bodies, and tourism operators seeking to differentiate genuine environmental commitments from superficial green claims.

Keywords: - Greenwashing, green trust, eco-tourism, repurchase intention, consumer scepticism, sustainable tourism

I. INTRODUCTION

The global eco-tourism market was valued at approximately USD 181 billion in 2019 and is projected to reach USD 333 billion by 2027 (Allied Market Research, 2020). This growth reflects a genuine shift in consumer preferences toward travel experiences that minimise environmental harm and contribute to local conservation. However, the commercial attractiveness of the 'eco' label has incentivised some tourism operators and destinations to make environmental claims that exceed their actual sustainability practices a phenomenon widely recognised as greenwashing (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

Greenwashing in tourism takes multiple forms: hotels that display environmental policies without implementing them, destinations that market themselves as 'green' while permitting ecologically damaging development, and tour operators that promise carbon-neutral experiences through questionable offset mechanisms (Font et al., 2012). The consequences extend beyond individual consumer deception. When travellers encounter greenwashing, their scepticism may generalise to the broader eco-tourism sector, undermining trust in legitimate sustainability initiatives and discouraging the very consumer behaviours that drive market-based conservation (Chen & Chang, 2013).

Despite the significance of this issue, empirical research distinguishing the effects of perceived greenwashing from perceived genuine sustainability on tourist attitudes and behaviours remains limited. Most existing studies examine greenwashing in isolation, without comparing it directly with authentic sustainability signals, and few account for the role of consumer environmental knowledge in shaping responses to green claims (Martínez et al., 2020). This study addresses these gaps by simultaneously modelling the effects of perceived greenwashing and perceived genuine sustainability on green scepticism, green trust, and repurchase intention among eco-tourists across three major destinations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Greenwashing in Tourism: Definitions and Manifestations

The term 'greenwashing' was coined by environmentalist Jay Westerveld in 1986, but academic attention to the concept accelerated only in the 2010s (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). Delmas and Burbano (2011) defined greenwashing as the intersection of poor environmental performance with positive communication about environmental performance. In tourism, Font et al. (2012) identified four categories: false claims (fabricating environmental credentials), vague claims (using undefined terms like 'eco-friendly'), irrelevant claims (highlighting trivial practices while ignoring major impacts), and hidden trade-offs (emphasising one green attribute while concealing others).

The tourism sector may be particularly susceptible to greenwashing because of the experiential and intangible nature of travel products. Unlike physical goods where environmental claims can be verified through labels and certifications, the sustainability of a tourism experience is difficult for consumers to assess before, during, or even after consumption (Parguel et al., 2011). A hotel guest may notice visible recycling bins and towel reuse cards but remain unaware of the property's total energy consumption, water sourcing practices, or waste disposal methods.

2.2. Green Trust and Green Scepticism

Green trust, defined as a consumer's willingness to depend on a product or service based on their belief in its environmental claims (Chen, 2010), has been identified as a mediator between environmental marketing and purchase behaviour. In tourism contexts, Martínez (2015) found that green trust positively predicted satisfaction and loyalty among hotel guests, while Kang and Hur (2012) demonstrated that trust in a hotel's environmental practices was associated with willingness to pay a price premium.

Green scepticism represents the opposite pole a tendency to doubt or disbelieve environmental claims (Mohr et al., 1998). Scepticism may arise from past experiences with greenwashing, general distrust of corporate environmental motives, or awareness of the gap between environmental rhetoric and practice in the tourism industry (Rahman et al., 2015). Once established, scepticism can be difficult to reverse, as sceptical consumers tend to interpret ambiguous environmental information negatively (Skarmas & Leonidou, 2013).

2.3. Theoretical Foundations: Signalling Theory and Attribution Theory

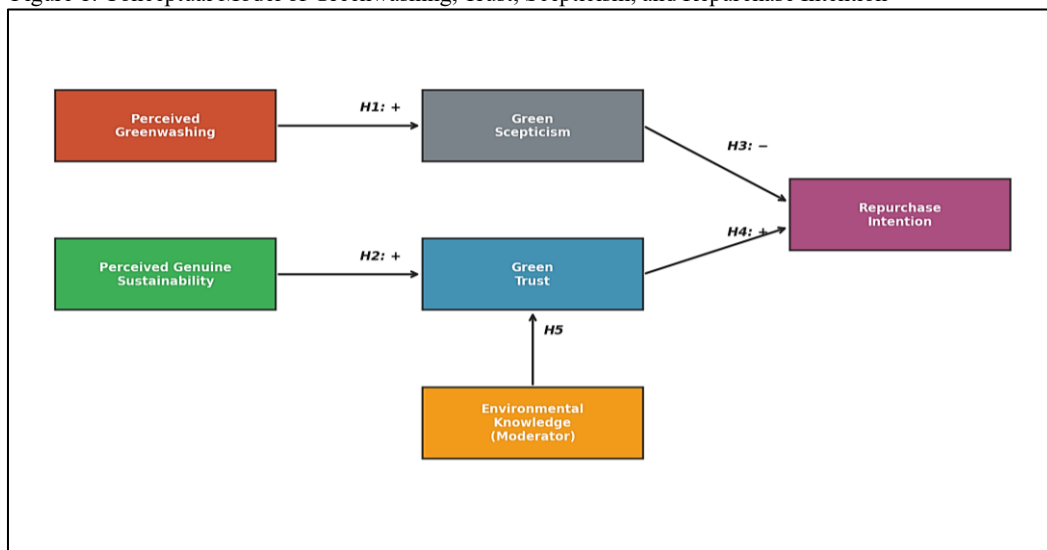
Signalling theory (Spence, 1973) provides a framework for understanding how eco-tourism operators communicate sustainability to consumers. Environmental certifications, sustainability reports, and green marketing materials function as signals of environmental quality. Effective signals must be costly to fake, observable by consumers, and correlated with actual quality (Connelly et al., 2011). Greenwashing occurs when operators send false signals environmental claims that are not costly to make and do not reflect actual practice.

Attribution theory (Kelley, 1973) explains how consumers interpret the motives behind green claims. When tourists attribute a destination's sustainability practices to genuine environmental concern (intrinsic motivation), they respond with trust and loyalty. When they attribute green claims to profit-seeking or image management (extrinsic motivation), scepticism and resentment follow (Nyilasy et al., 2014). Environmental knowledge may influence this attribution process: more knowledgeable consumers are better equipped to distinguish genuine from superficial sustainability signals.

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Based on the theoretical foundations outlined above, Figure 1 presents the conceptual model guiding this study.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Greenwashing, Trust, Scepticism, and Repurchase Intention



The following hypotheses are proposed: H1: Perceived greenwashing positively influences green scepticism. H2: Perceived genuine sustainability positively influences green trust. H3: Green scepticism negatively influences repurchase intention. H4: Green trust positively influences repurchase intention. H5: Environmental knowledge moderates the relationship between green trust and repurchase intention, such that the effect is stronger among more knowledgeable tourists.

IV. METHODOLOGY

An online survey was administered to tourists who had visited eco-tourism destinations in Costa Rica, Thailand, or Kenya within the preceding twelve months. Respondents were recruited through a combination of tourism panel providers, eco-tourism community forums, and social media advertisements targeting travellers with eco-tourism interests. Data were collected between January and April 2024.

The survey instrument incorporated established scales. Perceived greenwashing was measured using the 6-item scale developed by Chen and Chang (2013). Perceived genuine sustainability used 5 items adapted from Martínez (2015). Green scepticism was assessed with Mohr et al.'s (1998) 4-item scale adapted for tourism contexts. Green trust was measured using Chen's (2010) 5-item scale. Repurchase intention used a 4-item scale from Han et al. (2009). Environmental knowledge was assessed using 6 items from Frick et al. (2004). All items used 7-point Likert scales. The questionnaire was available in English, Spanish, and Thai.

A total of 487 responses were received, of which 420 were complete and usable (86.2 percent completion rate). Data were analysed using PLS-SEM in SmartPLS 4.0, chosen for its suitability for exploratory models and non-normal data distributions (Hair et al., 2017).

V. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

5.1. Measurement Model Assessment

Table 1. Measurement Model Validity: Factor Loadings, AVE, and Composite Reliability

Construct	Factor Loading Range	AVE	CR
Perceived Greenwashing	0.74 – 0.89	0.67	0.92
Perceived Genuine Sustainability	0.78 – 0.91	0.71	0.93
Green Scepticism	0.81 – 0.88	0.72	0.91
Green Trust	0.76 – 0.90	0.69	0.92
Repurchase Intention	0.83 – 0.92	0.76	0.93
Environmental Knowledge	0.72 – 0.86	0.63	0.90

Table 1 confirms that all constructs met the thresholds for convergent validity ($AVE > 0.50$) and internal consistency reliability ($CR > 0.70$). Factor loadings ranged from 0.72 to 0.92, all exceeding the 0.70 benchmark. Discriminant validity was confirmed through the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio, with all values below 0.85.

5.2. Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Table 2. Hypothesis Testing Results from PLS-SEM Analysis

Hypothesis	Path	B	t-value	Result
H1	PGW $\rightarrow$ GS	.52	9.87***	Supported
H2	PGS $\rightarrow$ GT	.48	8.42***	Supported
H3	GS $\rightarrow$ RI	-.31	5.67***	Supported
H4	GT $\rightarrow$ RI	.44	7.93***	Supported
H5	EK $\times$ GT $\rightarrow$ RI	.17	3.12**	Supported

All five hypotheses received empirical support (Table 2). Perceived greenwashing was a strong predictor of green scepticism ($\beta = .52$, $p < .001$), confirming that tourists who detect misleading environmental claims develop generalised doubt about sustainability in tourism. Perceived genuine sustainability had a similarly strong positive effect on green trust ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$). The model explained 47 percent of variance in repurchase intention.

Figure 2. PLS-SEM Path Coefficients for the Greenwashing–Trust–Repurchase Model

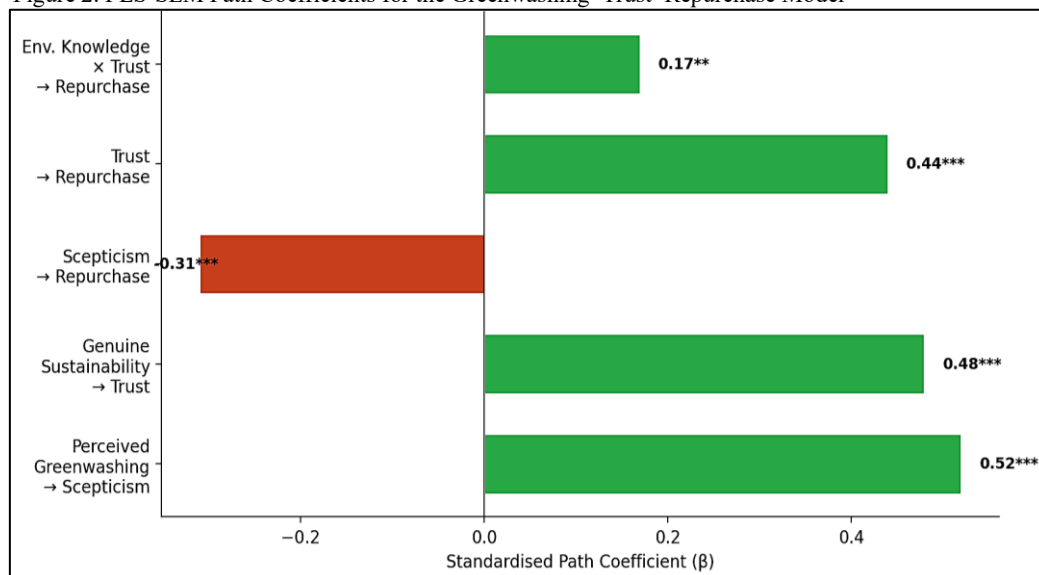


Figure 2 visualises the path coefficients. The negative path from scepticism to repurchase intention ($\beta = -.31$) was weaker than the positive path from trust to repurchase intention ($\beta = .44$), suggesting that building genuine trust may be more effective at driving loyalty than merely avoiding scepticism. The moderating effect of environmental knowledge ($\beta = .17, p < .01$) indicates that knowledgeable tourists are more discerning they reward genuine sustainability with stronger loyalty but are also less tolerant of greenwashing.

VI. DISCUSSION

The results of this study contribute to the growing body of evidence that greenwashing in tourism carries real economic consequences. The strong association between perceived greenwashing and green scepticism confirms that tourists are not passive recipients of environmental marketing they actively evaluate green claims and adjust their attitudes accordingly. The attribution theory framework proves useful here: when tourists attribute green claims to self-serving motives rather than genuine environmental concern, the resulting scepticism spills over into reduced repurchase intention.

The asymmetry between the scepticism and trust pathways is noteworthy. The fact that green trust exerts a stronger positive effect on repurchase intention than green scepticism exerts a negative effect suggests that the rewards for genuine sustainability are greater than the penalties for perceived greenwashing. This finding challenges the common assumption that greenwashing primarily operates through reputational damage and implies that authentic sustainability can function as a competitive advantage beyond mere risk mitigation.

The moderating role of environmental knowledge introduces a segmentation dimension that has practical value. Environmentally knowledgeable tourists who tend to be higher-spending, more loyal, and more likely to generate positive word-of-mouth (Dolnicar & Leisch, 2008) are precisely the segment most sensitive to greenwashing and most responsive to authenticity. For destinations and operators targeting this segment, the returns to genuine sustainability investment are amplified, while the costs of greenwashing are magnified.

Cross-destination comparisons revealed that respondents who had visited Costa Rica reported the highest levels of perceived genuine sustainability and the lowest levels of perceived greenwashing, consistent with Costa Rica's long-standing reputation for ecotourism governance and its Certification for Sustainable Tourism programme (Bien, 2006). Thailand respondents reported the highest scepticism scores, which may reflect the visible contradictions between mass tourism development and eco-tourism marketing in popular Thai destinations. Kenya respondents fell between the two, with community-based conservation areas generating stronger trust than commercially operated eco-lodges.

VII. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study demonstrates that perceived greenwashing and perceived genuine sustainability operate through distinct psychological pathways scepticism and trust, respectively to influence eco-tourist repurchase intention. Environmental knowledge amplifies these effects, making educated tourists both more rewarding to satisfy and more costly to deceive.

For tourism practitioners, the findings argue for a shift from environmental marketing to environmental transparency. Destinations and operators that provide verifiable evidence of their sustainability practices third-party certifications, published environmental performance data, transparent reporting of challenges alongside achievements are more likely to build the green trust that drives long-term loyalty. Conversely, operators that rely on vague or unsubstantiated green claims risk triggering scepticism that not only reduces their own repeat visitation but may damage the broader eco-tourism sector.

For policymakers and certification bodies, the study reinforces the case for stricter regulation of environmental claims in tourism marketing. Certification programmes that provide consumers with accessible, comparable sustainability information can serve as credible signals that reduce information asymmetry and reward genuine performers.

Limitations include the cross-sectional design, potential self-selection bias among respondents recruited through eco-tourism channels, and the retrospective nature of destination experience assessment. Future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs to examine how trust and scepticism evolve over repeated exposure to green claims and across different stages of the travel decision process.

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