Strategies to reduce unethical consumption behaviours among tourists for sustainable development: insights from tour guides

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Abstract

Unethical consumption behaviours among tourists-including wastefulness, environmental degradation, cultural disrespect, exploitative bargaining, and irresponsible use of local resources-pose increasing challenges for destinations seeking sustainable development. While much scholarship focuses on tourists' motivations or destination management strategies, fewer studies examine the roles of frontline tourism workers who directly shape visitor behaviour. This article draws on the insights and experiences of professional tour guides to identify practical and strategic approaches for reducing unethical consumption and promoting more sustainable practices. The article develops a multi-level framework combining behavioural influence theory, social learning perspectives, and sustainability communication strategies. Using qualitative insights from tour guides, it identifies five clusters of effective interventions: (1) pre-emptive education and expectation-setting, (2) modelling and reinforcing positive behaviour, (3) emotion-based persuasion and moral reframing, (4) situational management and environmental design, and (5) collaborative destination governance. Findings suggest that tour guides exercise significant agency as "micro-regulators" of sustainable tourism, but their efforts depend on institutional support, fair working conditions, and organisational training. The study highlights the need to reposition guides as co-creators of sustainability policy, not merely service providers. It concludes with practical recommendations for destination management organisations (DMOs), policymakers, training institutions, and tourism operators.

***Keywords**: tour guide, unethical consumption behaviour, sustainable tourism, effective interventions*

1. Introduction

Tourism has long been recognised as a double-edged phenomenon. While it offers economic benefits, cultural exchange, and employment opportunities, it simultaneously contributes to environmental degradation, resource depletion, and social inequities (Hall et al., 2015). Among the challenges faced by destinations, unethical consumption behaviours by tourists have emerged as a critical barrier to sustainable development. These behaviours may include excessive water use, food wastage, purchasing illegal wildlife products, disrespecting cultural norms, littering, damaging natural landscapes, or exploiting local labour markets (Gössling & Peeters, 2015). In the context of climate change, fragile ecosystems, and growing pressures on host communities, addressing these behaviours is not only desirable but imperative.

While scholars increasingly recognise the need for responsible tourist behaviour (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2016; Higham et al., 2019), much of the literature focuses on tourists' internal

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motivations, environmental attitudes, or demographic predictors of responsible behaviour. Far less attention is paid to the social actors who directly engage with tourists during their trips-particularly **tour guides**. Tour guides serve as cultural mediators, safety managers, educators, and interpreters of place. They are uniquely positioned to influence tourists' ethical awareness and consumption patterns (Ap & Wong, 2001; Rabotić, 2010). Their role becomes even more critical in destinations confronting climate-induced environmental pressures, as found in the study by Doan et al. (2025), which highlighted how guides shape tourists' behaviour in vulnerable settings.

Building on Doan et al.'s empirical findings, this article expands the scope to explore how tour guides can influence tourist behaviour across a wider spectrum of unethical consumption issues beyond climate-induced contexts. The study addresses the following research questions:

What types of unethical consumption behaviours do tour guides frequently encounter among tourists?

What strategies do tour guides use to reduce these behaviours and encourage more sustainable practices?

What structural or organisational factors support or hinder guides' efforts to influence tourists ethically?

By synthesising empirical evidence, behavioural theory, and guides' lived experiences, this article develops a comprehensive strategic framework for intervening in tourist behaviour. It argues that tour guides function as frontline agents of ethical tourism and have the capacity to shape significant behavioural change when supported by appropriate institutional structures.

This research makes several contributions. First, it situates tour guides more centrally within sustainability research, extending the conceptualisation of their role as educators and behavioural influencers. Second, it offers actionable strategies for operators, training institutions, and policymakers seeking to reduce unethical consumption. Finally, it responds to global sustainability agendas-including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)-which call for shifts in both consumption and production patterns (UNWTO, 2022).

2. Literature Review

In practice, research on this issue can be approached from various perspectives and through different methodological frameworks. The authors argue that, regardless of the chosen approach, it is essential to identify and address the following key issues in order to achieve the research objectives: *mitigation strategies; tourists' unethical consumption behavior; sustainable development; and the perspectives of tour guides*.

2.1 Unethical Consumption in Tourism

Unethical consumption has become a central concern within tourism studies as destinations face ecological fragility, climate-induced risks, and accelerated sociocultural transformation. While tourism is often framed as a benign form of leisure, its material practices contribute significantly to environmental degradation, resource inequality, and cultural appropriation (Gössling & Peeters, 2015). Tourism consumption-unlike everyday

consumption-is concentrated, intensified, and frequently detached from the moral norms that govern behaviour at home (Cohen & Cohen, 2019). This disembedded nature of tourism gives rise to a variety of unethical consumption patterns.

The first major category concerns **environmental irresponsibility**, including littering in natural parks, stepping on coral reefs, disturbing wildlife through feeding or close photography, and consuming disproportionate quantities of water or energy (Gössling, 2021). Such actions are often rationalised by tourists as short-term or insignificant, despite cumulative impacts on ecosystems. For example, studies in coastal destinations show that snorkellers and divers frequently underestimate the fragility of marine environments, leading to unintentional yet harmful contact with coral (Davis & Tisdell, 1995). Similarly, the expansion of tourism in water-scarce regions has amplified issues of overconsumption and sustainability injustice, as tourists' water use often exceeds that of local residents (Cole, 2012).

A second category involves **cultural disrespect**, which occurs when visitors disregard local customs or sacred values. Inappropriate dress in religious sites, unauthorised drone photography, entering restricted temples, or treating cultural artefacts merely as backdrops for social media are common examples (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006; Mkono, 2020). These behaviours are not only culturally insensitive but also commodify and trivialise local identity, contributing to what MacCannell (1999) calls the "sacralisation and de-sacralisation" cycle of heritage. In Asian destinations, in particular, spiritual spaces are often misinterpreted through Western secular lenses, leading tourists to engage in behaviours that locals view as profoundly disrespectful (Winter, 2009).

A third form of unethical consumption involves **economic exploitation**, which manifests through unfair bargaining, purchasing from unregulated vendors, or supporting exploitative tourism sectors. Bargaining far below fair market value can reinforce poverty traps for artisans and informal workers, while participation in unregulated volunteer tourism may displace local labour or reinforce dependency structures (Sin, 2009). Scholars have also noted that tourists' preference for cheap goods often fuels informal economies associated with unsafe working conditions and child labour (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

A further area of concern is **illegal purchasing behaviours**, such as buying wildlife products, antiquities, coral jewellery, or plant species under protection (UNODC, 2021). These activities contribute to global trafficking networks and the depletion of endangered species. Tourists may justify such purchases as "unique souvenirs", unaware of the legal and ecological implications. Even when laws are communicated clearly, some visitors perceive these warnings as part of the adventure of travel, engaging in "risk-laden consumption" that reinforces harmful trade (Packer et al., 2015).

Scholars have identified several psychological processes underpinning unethical consumption. **Moral disengagement** allows individuals to justify or neutralise harmful actions by minimising consequences or diffusing responsibility (Bandura, 2002). **Tourist exceptionalism** describes the belief that holidays represent a temporary moral suspension, where indulgence and gratification trump ethical considerations (Cohen, 2008). This is reinforced by **situational anonymity**, as tourists often feel unrecognised and unaccountable in

unfamiliar destinations (Shaw et al., 2004). In addition, **hedonic motivations** and sensory distractions reduce cognitive attention to consequences, making ethical decision-making less likely (Hunter, 2020). Together, these factors create a tourism environment where unethical consumption is both normalised and, at times, incentivised.

Understanding these drivers is crucial for designing interventions that tourism stakeholders-particularly tour guides-can use to mitigate harmful behaviour.

2.2 Responsible Tourist Behaviour and Behavioural Change

Responsible tourist behaviour encompasses actions that minimise harm and contribute positively to the cultural, environmental, and economic well-being of host communities (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2016). Yet translating ethical intentions into responsible action remains challenging due to the cognitive, emotional, and contextual complexities of travel. Tourists may express pro-environmental attitudes prior to travel but fail to act accordingly when confronted with situational pressures, convenience barriers, or the desire for leisure-based reward (Barr et al., 2010).

Scholars have therefore examined the mechanisms through which responsible behaviour can be encouraged. **Knowledge of environmental consequences** is foundational: tourists who understand the fragility of ecosystems are more likely to adjust their behaviour (Ballantyne et al., 2011). However, knowledge alone rarely drives sustained behavioural change, especially in leisure contexts. Instead, **social norms**-the perceived expectations of the group-play a stronger role. When responsible behaviour is framed as socially desirable or typical, tourists are more likely to comply (Cialdini, 2007; Gössling et al., 2019). Tour groups provide fertile ground for norm diffusion because individuals regularly observe and mimic the behaviour of peers.

Personal values and identity are also central. Tourists who see themselves as environmentally conscious are more likely to act responsibly, although identity-performance gaps persist (Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010). **Situational cues**, such as clear signage, accessible recycling facilities, or structured itineraries, create environments that make responsible behaviour easier. In contrast, ambiguous or disorganised settings often produce unintentional infractions.

Behavioural change also depends on **enforcement and sanctions**, though these are difficult to implement without compromising visitor experience. Research indicates that soft enforcement-gentle reminders, moral framing, or guide-led boundary setting-tends to be more effective than punitive measures in tourism contexts (Ham, 2007). Finally, **role modelling and persuasive communication** by credible messengers can significantly influence behaviour. Storytelling, emotional appeals, and interpretive guidance have been shown to enhance tourists' sense of connection to place, thereby increasing their willingness to behave responsibly (Moscardo, 1996).

These insights highlight the need for interventions that combine cognitive, emotional, and situational dimensions-precisely the domains in which tour guides operate daily.

2.3 Tour Guides as Behavioural Influencers

Tour guides are among the most visible and influential actors in tourism systems. Their role extends far beyond providing information; they shape tourist perceptions, mediate cultural encounters, and regulate behaviour through subtle forms of leadership and communication (Ap & Wong, 2001). Research has conceptualised guides as **interpreters**, **mediators**, **educators**, **performers**, and **risk managers**, each of which positions them to influence consumption behaviour (Rabotić, 2010).

Several attributes underpin their behavioural influence. First, guides have **expert authority**. Their knowledge of local environments, cultures, and histories affords them credibility. Tourists often view guides as authentic ambassadors of place, making them receptive to guidance about ethical behaviour (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). Second, guides possess **social credibility as local insiders**. Unlike promotional materials or regulatory signage, guides offer human connection, contextualised explanations, and personalised interactions.

Third, guides cultivate **emotional rapport** with tourists. Through humour, empathy, and relational communication, they establish trust, which creates an enabling environment for behavioural persuasion. This relational dynamic is particularly effective when addressing sensitive issues such as waste, dress codes, or illegal wildlife purchases. Fourth, guides exercise significant **control over itineraries and activities**, allowing them to curate experiences that minimise opportunities for unethical consumption. For example, guides may select responsible vendors, structure visits to reduce environmental strain, or design routes that avoid culturally sensitive areas.

Doan et al. (2025) further show that guides in climate-induced regions act as **environmental stewards**, leveraging storytelling, moral messages, and social norms to encourage tourists to adopt responsible practices. Their findings support broader calls to recognise guides as key agents in sustainable tourism governance rather than peripheral service workers.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a constructivist qualitative orientation to explore how tour guides develop and implement strategies to reduce unethical consumption behaviours among tourists. A constructivist paradigm is particularly suitable because it acknowledges that knowledge is socially constructed through interactions, experiences, and contextual interpretation (Charmaz, 2014). The aim of the research was not to quantify the prevalence of unethical consumption but to understand the nuanced, situated meanings that tour guides attribute to these behaviours, as well as the strategies they use to influence tourists' choices in real time. Tour guides' perspectives offer rich insights into the complexities of everyday encounters, the negotiation of behavioural norms, and the subtle moral engagements embedded in guiding practices. In addition, the authors employed a combination of tourism research methods, including fieldwork, expert interviews, and sociological surveys, integrated into the in-depth interviews with tour guides in Ho Chi Minh City, in order to enhance the overall rigor and value of the study.

3.1 Research Design

The study was designed as an exploratory inquiry and interpreted using in-depth semi-structured interviews with 23 professional tour guides who are primarily and regularly active in the former central District 1 of Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), Vietnam. The tourists most frequently encountered by these tour guides are predominantly from Europe, the United States, India, South Korea, and other regions. HCMC offers a unique setting due to its dense urban tourism ecosystem, diverse tourist demographics, and high exposure to issues such as overconsumption, waste generation, wildlife purchasing, and cultural misbehaviour. Guides in this context navigate a wide range of tourist behaviours on a daily basis, making them ideal informants for uncovering practical strategies and lived experiences.

The decision to focus on tour guides aligns with previous research emphasising their central role as behaviour managers and cultural mediators (Rabotić, 2010; Weiler & Black, 2015). The semi-structured format allowed for depth and flexibility, giving participants space to narrate real examples, contextualise challenges, and reflect on personal strategies. This approach aligns with a constructivist understanding that reality is co-created by researcher and participant during the interview process.

3.2 Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants with diverse backgrounds, including freelance guides, guides employed by travel agencies, and specialist guides working in cultural, culinary, wildlife, and heritage tours. The guiding experience of participants ranged from 3 to 22 years. This diversity enabled the capture of multiple perspectives on both the forms of unethical consumption encountered and the interventions used to address them.

Participants were recruited through professional tour guiding networks, tourism associations, and referrals (snowballing), which facilitated access to experienced guides who could articulate reflective and practice-based insights. The sample size of 23 was deemed appropriate for qualitative thematic saturation (Hennink et al., 2017), as no new themes emerged after approximately 20 interviews, though the remaining interviews added nuance and depth.

3.3 Data Collection

Interviews were conducted between March and July 2025. All interviews were held in places chosen by participants-typically cafés, training centres, or quiet public spaces-to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in Vietnamese.

A semi-structured interview guide was used, with questions covering:
Experiences with tourist consumption behaviours in practice
Examples of unethical or irresponsible consumption
Strategies used to influence or change tourist behaviour
Challenges encountered when attempting behavioural intervention
Reflections on how sustainable development principles shape guiding practices

Follow-up probing questions enabled participants to elaborate on personal stories and contextual explanations.

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis while retaining key idiomatic nuances. Reflective field notes were written immediately after each interview to capture emerging impressions, contextual observations, and initial analytical thoughts.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarisation, coding, theme development, reviewing, defining, and reporting. NVivo 14 was used to manage, code, and organise the data systematically. NVivo facilitated the handling of large qualitative datasets, enabled coding consistency, allowed comparison across participants, and supported visualisation of theme relationships through query functions and node structures.

Coding began with an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data, consistent with the constructivist epistemology. Initial codes included categories such as "waste management messages," "storytelling for moral influence," "peer accountability," "tourist resistance," and "cultural explanation strategies." As analysis progressed, broader themes were identified, including:

Preventive communication before behavioural violations occur
On-site corrective strategies
Emotional and cultural reframing
Structural and logistical interventions
Collaborative, community-based approaches

Throughout the analysis, reflexive memos were written to interrogate assumptions and track evolving interpretations. This reflexive practice ensured analytical transparency and mitigated the influence of researcher positionality on theme construction (Nowell et al., 2017).

3.5 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To enhance credibility, member checking was conducted with six participants who reviewed summaries of initial themes to confirm accuracy and resonance with their experiences. Triangulation was achieved by comparing findings across guides with different expertise and organisational affiliations.

Dependability was strengthened through maintaining a clear audit trail-including interview guides, coding frameworks, and analytical memos-ensuring that research decisions were transparent and replicable. Thick descriptions in reporting enhance transferability by allowing readers to assess relevance to other tourism contexts.

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional ethics committee. All participants provided informed consent, were assured confidentiality, and were assigned pseudonyms to protect identity. Given that guides shared sensitive experiences involving tourist conflict or organisational pressures, particular care was taken to anonymise contextual details that could reveal identities.

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4. Findings and Thematic Discussion

Analysis of the 23 interviews produced five interconnected thematic clusters illustrating how tour guides understand, negotiate, and intervene in unethical tourist consumption. These themes illuminate the subtle communicative labour, emotional intelligence, and strategic decision-making used by guides to support more responsible consumption practices. Although guides frequently emphasised that most tourists do not intentionally behave unethically, they recognised a persistent pattern of ignorance, cultural mismatch, and "holiday exceptionalism," which rendered behavioural intervention essential. The themes are discussed below, with illustrative quotes.

4.1 Pre-Emptive Education and Expectation-Setting

4.1.1 Importance of early intervention

Across interviews, guides repeatedly stressed that prevention is far more effective than correction. Many unethical behaviours emerged not from malicious intent but from tourists' limited awareness of the environmental, cultural, or social implications of their actions. A senior nature guide with 15 years of experience explained:

> *"Most tourists do not wake up thinking they will damage the environment. They simply don't know. If I explain early, they understand and avoid mistakes."* (Guide 07)

Another cultural heritage guide echoed this sentiment, noting that misbehaviour is often the consequence of cultural disconnect rather than disrespect:

> *"It's not that they mean to be rude in temples. They just don't know which areas are sacred or why you cannot touch certain statues. If we wait until they violate, it is already too late."* (Guide 12)

Early expectation-setting therefore acts as a buffer, reducing the likelihood of negative incidents and minimising the social tension that arises when guides must correct behaviour after the fact.

4.1.2 Tools and practices

Guides draw on a mix of verbal, visual, and digital tools to set expectations before tourists engage in activities. These include:

Pre-tour briefings: Almost every guide described delivering a short, structured briefing at the start of the tour. This covers environmental conditions, cultural norms, safety guidelines, and expected behaviours. Guides emphasised brevity and clarity. Digital pre-arrival materials: Increasingly, guides and agencies send welcome videos or eco-tips before tourists even arrive. A freelance guide remarked that this helps frame the tour as an ethical experience: *"If they watch the video about waste or water shortages before flying, they come mentally prepared. They know the purpose of responsible travel."* (Guide 19)

Cultural and climate narratives: Guides often weave in narratives about environmental or cultural vulnerability to contextualise expectations. Decolonised cultural briefings: Some guides purposely avoided hierarchical or exoticising descriptions of local culture. Instead, they positioned communities as active custodians of heritage: *"I don't say 'this is how we serve tourists.' I say 'this is our home and we invite you to respect it as we do.' This changes the energy completely."* (Guide 14)

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4.1.3 Communication tone

Although guides emphasised clarity, they also noted that tone determines whether tourists listen or resist. A strict or moralistic tone could be perceived as patronising. Instead, guides adopted culturally grounded, friendly communication: *"If you lecture them, they switch off. If you talk like a friend sharing your culture, they follow."* (Guide 02)

Humility increases receptiveness, particularly in mixed-nationality groups. A guide working with European and North American tourists explained: *"I often say: 'This is what my grandmother taught me'; tourists respect that. It feels authentic and not like a rulebook."* (Guide 21)

This relational tone aligns with Vietnam's high-context communication culture, where indirectness and emotional warmth support behavioural acceptance.

4.2 Modelling and Reinforcing Positive Behaviour

4.2.1 Behavioural modelling

Guides frequently emphasised that tourists learn more from observing than from being told. Many behaviours-respecting sacred spaces, avoiding plastic waste, seeking permission for photography-were best modelled rather than explained (*See Figure 1*). One participant reported: *"If I carry my own bottle and refill it, they follow. If I sort rubbish properly, they copy me."* (Guide 11)

In sacred sites, guides demonstrate appropriate behaviour by slowing their pace, lowering their voice, or making small ritual gestures: *"I show them how to enter the temple slowly. When they see me bow slightly, they imitate. No need for long explanation."* (Guide 09)

This form of embodied teaching aligns with Bandura's (1986) social learning theory: behavioural norms become visible and believable when performed by a credible model.

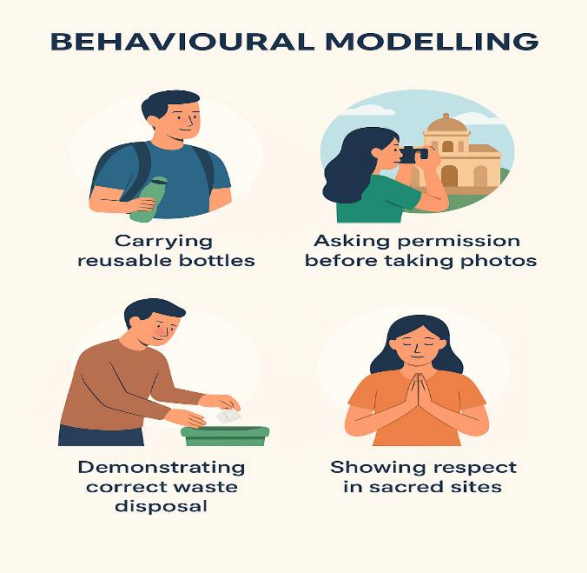

Figure 1. Demonstration of behavioural modelling
Source: Authors' own model development.

4.2.2 Reinforcement mechanisms

Guides supplemented modelling with various reinforcement strategies:

Praise for responsible behaviour: *"When someone refills their bottle or helps pick up trash, I praise them. The whole group becomes proud and imitates."* (Guide 04)

Story-based reinforcement: Some guides shared stories of responsible tourists, subtly valorising ethical behaviour: *"I say, 'Last week a family helped reduce waste by bringing their own lunch boxes'-people feel inspired."* (Guide 10)

Gentle correction: Corrections were delivered softly and privately wherever possible to avoid embarrassment: *"If someone breaks a rule, I walk to them quietly and explain the reason. They appreciate the respect."* (Guide 17)

Collectively, these strategies frame responsible behaviour as normal, attractive, and socially rewarded.

4.3 Emotion-Based Persuasion and Moral Reframing

While information is necessary, guides highlighted that facts alone rarely shift behaviour. Emotional strategies-empathy, humour, and moral reframing-proved more effective.

4.3.1 Empathy-building stories

Guides told stories about communities affected by climate change, pollution, or cultural degradation. These stories brought issues to life: *"I tell them about the fisherman whose nets catch plastic instead of fish. When they hear it's a real person, not an abstract problem, they stop littering."* (Guide 15)

Another reported: *"When I share how my family had to move house because of flooding, the tourists become very protective of the environment."* (Guide 08)

These narratives foster moral reflection and help tourists emotionally connect with place-based issues.

4.3.2 Moral reframing

Guides reframed responsible behaviour not as obligation but as:

Respect: *"I say, 'When you behave this way, it shows respect for local people.' Respect matters to most visitors."* (Guide 22)

Protection for future generations: *"I tell them the place is beautiful because people protected it. If we all care together, our children can enjoy it too."* (Guide 06)

Participation in local resilience: *"I say, 'You are now part of the community protecting this area.' This makes them feel proud."* (Guide 03)

This reframing taps into positive emotions-gratitude, pride, empathy-rather than guilt or fear.

4.3.3 Humour and relational communication

Humour emerged as a culturally effective way to correct behaviour without embarrassment: *"If someone forgets the rule, I make a small joke. Everyone laughs and the message is clear without conflict."* (Guide 01)

Humour softened the enforcement process and strengthened group rapport, which in turn encouraged conformity to ethical norms.

4.4 Situational Management and Environmental Design

Beyond communication, guides also modify physical and social environments to support responsible behaviour.

4.4.1 Structuring choices

Guides frequently alter itineraries, vendor choices, and logistical setups to reduce opportunities for unethical consumption:

Waste management: *"I always choose places with recycling bins. If bins are there, tourists will sort their waste."* (Guide 05)

Sustainable restaurants: *"I bring groups to restaurants that use local produce and reduce plastic. It's easier for tourists to behave well when the environment supports it."* (Guide 20)

Avoiding illegal trade: *"I don't stop at shops selling wildlife products. If you remove the temptation, you remove the problem."* (Guide 13)

These decisions shift responsibility from individual tourists to the wider tourism system.

4.4.2 Group dynamics

Many guides carefully manage group norms, recognising that tourists follow the behaviour of peers: *"If one person does something wrong, others think it is allowed. I set group agreements early to create a shared standard."* (Guide 04)

Peer reinforcement is used strategically: *"When the group praises someone for being responsible, it creates a positive social pressure."* (Guide 18)

By shaping group identity around sustainability, guides foster a collective moral climate.

4.4.3 Risk management and enforcement

Although guides prefer soft approaches, they acknowledged moments when firm boundaries are necessary-especially in fragile ecosystems or sacred spaces: *"In the mangrove forest, if someone tries to touch wildlife, I must be strict. The risk is too high."* (Guide 16)

Some described escalating strategies: *"First, I explain gently. If they continue, I warn them clearly. If needed, I report to the operator."* (Guide 07)

Enforcement was framed as care for the environment, not punishment.

4.5 Collaborative Destination Governance

Guides repeatedly stressed that they cannot shift behaviour alone; structural inconsistencies in the tourism system often undermine their efforts.

4.5.1 Cross-sector collaboration

Guides emphasised the need for alignment among tour operators, DMOs, environmental agencies, and cultural custodians: *"I teach tourists not to buy single-use plastic, but then the restaurant serves everything in plastic. We need the system to work together."* (Guide 14)

Collaboration ensures consistent messaging and reduces mixed signals.

4.5.2 Training and professional development

Many guides highlighted gaps in formal training, particularly in sustainability communication, conflict resolution, and cross-cultural interpretation: *"We are expected to manage behaviour, but we never receive proper training on how to do this."* (Guide 09)

They expressed strong interest in capacity-building programmes that integrate behavioural psychology, climate communication, and decolonial interpretation practices.

4.5.3 Policy support

Finally, guides identified regulatory clarity as a key enabler: *"If the government bans wildlife products but enforcement is weak, tourists ignore the rule. Stronger policy gives us authority."* (Guide 11)

Transparent, consistent regulations help guides justify boundaries and enhance credibility when communicating sustainability expectations.

Across the five themes, the findings reveal that guides enact a sophisticated blend of communicative, emotional, social, and environmental strategies to reduce unethical consumption behaviours. Their influence lies not only in providing information but also in shaping experiences, relationships, and environments. Rather than relying on moral judgement, guides foster empathy, group identity, and shared responsibility-anchored in a deep understanding of local culture and environmental vulnerability.

Together, these findings highlight tour guides as frontline behavioural stewards whose strategies hold significant potential for advancing sustainable tourism development when supported by training, governance, and system-wide coordination.

5. Implications

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the evolving scholarship on sustainable and ethical tourism by foregrounding the role of tour guides as *behavioural stewards* rather than merely facilitators of itineraries. Existing frameworks often position responsible tourism as an individualised moral obligation of the traveller or as a structural responsibility of destination management organisations (DMOs). The findings challenge this dichotomy by introducing a *mid-level agent model*, highlighting how tour guides operate at the intersection of micro-level tourist behaviours and macro-level environmental and cultural vulnerabilities.

The narratives reveal that guides influence consumption patterns through relational trust-building, emotional resonance, situational design, and culturally grounded communication. These mechanisms extend tourism behavioural theory by demonstrating how social learning

(Bandura, 1986), behavioural nudging (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008), and moral reframing (Feinberg & Willer, 2015) are mobilised in dynamic, short-term tourism encounters. Unlike static educational approaches, the guides' strategies show that behaviour change in tourism is temporal, contextually responsive, and embedded within social interactions.

This research also extends the work of Doan et al. (2025) on responsible behaviour in climate-induced areas. While the earlier model emphasised environmental vulnerability and motivational pathways, the present study broadens the conceptual scope to encompass cultural, economic, and ethical dimensions of consumption. It also highlights the emotional labour and soft-power diplomacy exercised by guides-elements underexplored in prior tourism ethics studies. By documenting how guides integrate empathy-building stories, humour, and relational communication into behavioural interventions, the findings contribute to a more holistic understanding of ethical consumption as both cognitive and affective.

Furthermore, the study underscores the significance of guides as co-governors in destination sustainability systems. Their frontline position and daily interactions with tourists allow them to detect emerging patterns of misconduct, mediate conflicts, and negotiate cultural boundaries-functions that align with adaptive co-management theory. Thus, guides are conceptualised not only as interpreters of place but as agents who stabilise moral order in rapidly changing tourism environments.

5.2 Practical Implications

5.2.1 For tour operators

Tour operators stand to benefit from institutionalising sustainability within tour design and guide practice. Integrating structured sustainability briefings into all programmes ensures consistency and reduces reliance on individual guide discretion. Operators should also provide clear backing for guides when enforcing behavioural regulations, as authority without institutional support limits effectiveness. Co-creating communication scripts with guides-who understand tourist psychology intimately-can enhance authenticity and improve compliance.

5.2.2 For DMOs and policymakers

DMOs and policymakers should formally recognise tour guides as partners in sustainability governance. Developing clear, accessible guidelines for ethical tourist behaviour would remove ambiguity and strengthen enforcement. Certified training programmes in sustainability communication, behavioural intervention, and intercultural negotiation would empower guides and promote professionalisation of the sector. Policies should also align regulations across operators and attractions to ensure behavioural expectations are consistent.

Tourism policymakers in Vietnam in general, and in Ho Chi Minh City in particular, need to establish coordinated mechanisms in issuing regulations governing tour guide licensing requirements. At present, obtaining domestic and international tour guide cards is relatively easy. Even many training institutions that provide tour guiding professional certificates-an essential prerequisite for license issuance-do not genuinely focus on professional training, skill development, or awareness enhancement, but instead prioritize enrollment volume and revenue. This shortcoming is likely to lead to a range of adverse consequences in the future.

5.2.3 For training institutions

Training institutions play a vital role in equipping future guides with the tools to manage unethical behaviour. Curricula should include behavioural psychology, ethics, intercultural communication, and conflict resolution. Scenario-based training-simulating issues such as illegal purchasing, cultural disrespect, or environmental misconduct-would allow trainees to practise interventions in safe environments and build confidence.

The body of knowledge provided to students majoring in tour guiding at universities and colleges plays a crucial role. Future tour guides are currently lacking in practical skills and real-world experience related to tourist behavior, particularly unethical tourist behavior. Practical and application-oriented courses that can be incorporated into the curriculum-such as Tourism Psychology and Communication Skills; Tourism Marketing; Sales Skills; Tour Guiding Operations; Tour Operations Management; Tourist Consumer Behavior; and others-would contribute significantly to enhancing awareness and professional competencies among future generations of tour guides.

5.2.4 For local communities

Local communities can collaborate with guides to ensure that cultural heritage is represented respectfully and accurately. Regular dialogue between community custodians and guides can help identify sensitive sites, emerging risks, and community protection needs. Such collaboration strengthens shared stewardship and ensures that tourism development aligns with community priorities.

6. Conclusion

Unethical consumption behaviours represent one of the most immediate challenges to sustainable tourism development. This article demonstrates that tour guides play an indispensable yet often undervalued role in influencing tourist behaviour. Through education, modelling, emotional persuasion, situational management, and collaborative governance, guides exert a substantial positive impact on sustainability outcomes.

However, their influence is not automatic; it requires structural support, training, and recognition of guides as ethical leaders rather than mere service providers. As destinations increasingly face climate pressures, cultural commodification, and resource scarcity, the role of tour guides in shaping responsible consumption becomes more critical than ever.

Ultimately, creating a sustainable tourism future demand not only policy frameworks and technological solutions but also **human-centred strategies**-and tour guides stand at the forefront of this work.

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