

# Making sense of sustainability abroad: How international tourists interpret and practice sustainable behaviors in Ho Chi Minh City

Mai Thuan Loi<sup>1\*</sup>, Nguyen Thi Van Hanh<sup>2</sup>, Nguyen Thi Thanh Nga<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Hospitality and Tourism - Hue University, 22 Lam Hoang St., Hue City, Vietnam

<sup>2</sup>University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City, 10-12 Dinh Tien Hoang St., Sai Gon, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

\* Correspondence to: Mai Thuan Loi <mtloi.tdl24@hueuni.edu.vn >

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**Abstract:** International tourists often struggle to maintain sustainable behaviors when traveling abroad, yet little is known about how they interpret and adapt sustainability in unfamiliar environments. This qualitative study investigates how visitors to Ho Chi Minh City make sense of sustainability through an interpretive process shaped by contextual cues and practical constraints. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 20 international tourists recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, the findings reveal that sustainability abroad is actively reconstructed rather than transferred intact from home-country norms. Tourists interpret a variety of environmental, infrastructural, business, and social cues, which guide the recalibration of their sustainability standards. In turn, they enact small-scale micro-practices such as limiting amenities, reusing bags or bottles, or supporting local vendors that align with both moral identity and situational feasibility. The study proposes an empirically grounded process model that refines the cue–interpretation–action logic of sensemaking by specifying how contextual cues lead to recalibrated sustainability standards and subsequent micro-practices. Managerial implications highlight the need for consistent sustainability messaging, green-by-default infrastructure, and the reduction of conflicting cues that hinder tourists’ interpretive clarity.

**Keywords:** sensemaking, sustainable tourist behavior, micro-practices, Ho Chi Minh City

## 1. Introduction

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) has emerged as one of Vietnam’s most dynamic urban tourism destinations, experiencing strong recovery momentum after the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the national tourism report, Vietnam welcomed a significant surge in international arrivals in 2024, with HCMC consistently accounting for a major share of inbound flows and tourism revenue (Vietnam News Agency & Vietnam National Authority of Tourism, 2024). The city’s tourism authority similarly highlights substantial year-on-year growth in international visitors and the strategic expansion of diversified tourism products such as MICE, river tourism, and the nighttime economy throughout 2025 (Ho Chi Minh City Department of Tourism, 2025). Rapid expansion, however, places considerable pressure on the city’s urban environment, public infrastructure, and service systems. Recent Vietnamese studies indicate that sustainable tourism development in urban contexts such as HCMC faces challenges related to waste management, resource use, local community impacts, and uneven environmental infrastructure (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020; Phuc & Nguyen, 2023).

Within this context, understanding tourists’ sustainable behaviors becomes increasingly critical. Research emphasizes that tourists’ choices, environmental responsibility, and destination-specific actions have

direct implications for sustainability outcomes (Wut et al., 2023). Yet the growing literature also highlights complexities embedded in the so-called intention–behavior gap, where visitors’ pro-sustainability values do not consistently translate into action once they arrive at a destination (Nieto-García et al., 2024). Such gaps are often magnified in rapidly developing urban environments, where infrastructural limitations, sociocultural unfamiliarity, or limited sustainability cues may disrupt tourists’ expectations and practices.

Vietnamese scholarship reinforces this pattern. Studies conducted in major cities indicate that visitors’ environmental responsibility, resource use patterns, and support for sustainable initiatives are shaped not only by individual attitudes but also by contextual constraints such as service accessibility, destination management capacity, and the interplay between formal and informal urban systems (Nguyen et al., 2022; Phuc & Nguyen, 2023). These insights suggest that sustainable behavior is not merely an individual disposition, but a situated process shaped by how tourists perceive, evaluate, and make sense of the host environment.

Despite substantive progress, existing research in Vietnam primarily examines factors influencing sustainable behavior or evaluates destination-level sustainability; far fewer studies explore the interpretive processes through which international tourists understand sustainability while navigating an unfamiliar and complex urban space. In particular, little is known about how international visitors reconstruct or adjust their sustainability standards when encountering local infrastructure, cultural norms, consumption practices, and environmental cues in HCMC. This gap is noteworthy because sensemaking, the process by which individuals interpret situations and decide how to act, may help explain why tourists adapt or diverge from their sustainability intentions during travel. More broadly, although previous studies have identified contextual factors associated with sustainable tourist behavior, they have paid far less attention to the interpretive mechanisms through which tourists transform contextual cues into behavioral responses. Consequently, how sustainability meanings are reconstructed before behavioral decisions are made remains insufficiently understood.

To address this gap, this study investigates how international tourists interpret and practice sustainability during their on-site experiences in Ho Chi Minh City. Using in-depth qualitative interviews, the study explores (1) how visitors make sense of sustainability within the city’s sociocultural and infrastructural context, (2) how such interpretations shape their sustainable or unsustainable practices, and (3) which contextual barriers or facilitators influence these behaviors. By examining these interpretive processes, this study extends the application of sensemaking to sustainable tourism and provides an empirically grounded explanation of how contextual cues lead tourists to recalibrate their sustainability standards before engaging in contextually feasible practices. By focusing on interpretive processes, the study contributes to a richer understanding of sustainable tourist behavior in Southeast Asian megacities and offers new insights into the mechanisms shaping the intention behavior gap in international travel.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Sustainable Tourist Behavior**

Research increasingly shows that sustainable tourist behavior is context-dependent rather than stable. Dolnicar and Grün (2009) highlight that tourists’ environmentally friendly actions shift across situations depending on convenience, infrastructure, and environmental cues, suggesting that sustainable behavior is

shaped by context more than by attitudes alone. This dynamism helps explain why intentions often fail to translate into consistent action.

A central concept in this field is the attitude-behavior gap. Juvan and Dolnicar (2014) demonstrate that tourists who value sustainability frequently behave unsustainably during trips, especially when convenience or comfort is compromised. Higham et al. (2016) similarly show that even climate-concerned tourists struggle to alter high-impact practices such as transport choices. Psychological mechanisms also contribute to this inconsistency: cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) leads tourists to rationalize unsustainable actions, while diffusion of responsibility (Darley & Latané, 1968) reduces their perceived personal obligation to act sustainably. Recent scholarship further suggests that this gap is amplified not only by contextual constraints but also by the complexity of how tourists negotiate sustainability in real-world travel settings (Nieto-García et al., 2024).

Infrastructure and service environments further influence behavior. Font and McCabe (2017) note that credible information and clear sustainability cues enhance tourists' willingness to engage in responsible actions. Nguyen et al. (2022), studying hotels in Ho Chi Minh City, find that limited availability of sustainable service options constrains consumers' ability to choose environmentally friendly alternatives. These findings confirm that sustainable behavior depends as much on the destination's enabling conditions as on tourists' internal motivations.

Cultural norms add another layer of complexity. Reisinger and Turner (2003) argue that tourists interpret behavioral expectations through the lens of their home-country norms, which can produce uncertainty or misalignment when operating in unfamiliar settings. Trust and experiential familiarity also shape sustainable behavior: Torres-Moraga et al. (2021) show that tourists are more likely to perceive destinations as sustainable when they trust local providers and feel socially connected to the place.

Recent reviews synthesize these determinants and emphasize that sustainable tourist behavior emerges from interactions between personal values, contextual constraints, cultural interpretations, and infrastructure (Li et al., 2024). Together, these studies depict sustainable behavior not as a fixed trait but as a situated and adaptive process, shaped by how tourists make sense of the social and environmental conditions they encounter during travel. However, while previous research has identified the key determinants of sustainable tourist behavior, much less attention has been devoted to explaining the interpretive processes through which tourists translate contextual cues into behavioral responses. This limitation highlights the need to examine sustainability not only as an outcome of attitudes or contextual conditions but also as a process of meaning construction in unfamiliar destinations.

## **2.2. Sensemaking as an Interpretive Process**

Sensemaking provides a valuable lens for understanding how individuals interpret unfamiliar or complex situations. Rooted in the work of Weick (1995), sensemaking describes the process through which people extract cues from their environment and assemble them into coherent interpretations that guide subsequent action. In its broadest form, sensemaking follows a cue-interpretation-action logic, whereby individuals notice salient environmental cues, interpret them through existing frames of reference, and use these interpretations to guide subsequent behavior. Rather than a linear or purely cognitive activity, sensemaking is iterative, social, and grounded in context. It becomes most salient in situations of ambiguity when individuals must navigate unfamiliar settings, incomplete information, or conflicting expectations.

In tourism, these conditions frequently occur as travelers encounter new cultural environments, novel consumption systems, and unfamiliar social norms. Reisinger and Turner (2003) emphasize that tourists interpret behavioral expectations and environmental cues through the lens of their cultural background. This cross-cultural filtering means that even simple signs, services, or social practices can carry different meanings for international visitors. Building on this logic, sensemaking helps explain how tourists “read” a destination, including signage, transportation systems, service encounters, and the everyday behaviors of residents as cues that inform their judgments about appropriate conduct.

Sensemaking also illuminates how tourists adjust their internal standards when traveling abroad. Sustainable behavior, as shown by Dolnicar and Grün (2009), is highly sensitive to context; visitors re-evaluate what is feasible, reasonable, or expected based on the signals they perceive. When infrastructure or norms differ substantially from those at home, tourists may recalibrate their sustainability expectations, either relaxing or strengthening their practices depending on situational cues. This aligns with cognitive dissonance mechanisms (Festinger, 1957), whereby tourists reconcile internal values with external constraints through reinterpretation rather than direct behavioral change.

Despite its relevance, sensemaking has been scarcely applied in sustainable tourism research. Recent reviews of sustainable tourist behavior (Li et al., 2024) have not identified sensemaking as a core theoretical framework, and the field remains dominated by models emphasizing attitudes, norms, or intentions. This indicates a substantial gap: while scholars acknowledge that sustainable behavior is context-dependent and influenced by interpretation, few studies explicitly examine the interpretive processes shaping tourists’ judgments in unfamiliar sustainability environments.

Applying sensemaking to international tourists in Ho Chi Minh City thus offers theoretical advancement. Rather than proposing an entirely new process, this study refines the broad cue–interpretation–action logic of sensemaking by specifying how tourists recalibrate their sustainability standards before translating interpretations into contextually feasible practices. It therefore provides a mechanism to understand how contextual cues are transformed into sustainability practices, explaining why sustainable behavior shifts across cultural and infrastructural contexts. Compared with previous sustainable tourism studies that primarily explain behavior through attitudes, norms, or intentions, this perspective foregrounds interpretation as the mechanism linking contextual conditions with behavioral adjustment.

Overall, the literature suggests that sustainable tourist behavior is highly context-dependent and shaped by how travelers interpret unfamiliar cues in new environments. However, while previous studies have identified the determinants of sustainable behavior, the interpretive mechanisms through which tourists reconstruct sustainability meanings in unfamiliar destinations remain insufficiently explored. This gap highlights the need for a qualitative investigation of sustainability sensemaking among international tourists in Ho Chi Minh City.

### **3. Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which is appropriate for examining how individuals construct meaning in unfamiliar contexts. Given the study’s focus on sensemaking and context-dependent interpretations of sustainability, an interpretivist approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how international tourists understand, negotiate, and adapt sustainability-related behaviors during their visit to Ho Chi Minh City.

The sample consisted of 20 international tourists who were recruited at major tourist sites across Ho Chi Minh City, including museums, walking streets, and cultural attractions. Recruitment followed a maximum variation logic, seeking participants with diverse nationalities, ages, genders, and travel experiences. All participants met the inclusion criteria of being non-Vietnamese visitors, staying in the city for at least two days, and having engaged in multiple tourism activities during their visit. This ensured that participants had sufficient exposure to the local environment and were able to reflect meaningfully on their on-site experiences. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, combining direct approaches at tourist sites with participant referrals to identify information-rich participants with diverse sustainability experiences. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was achieved, with later interviews reinforcing rather than substantially extending the emerging themes. The demographic characteristics of the sample are summarized in Table 1 below.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30-45 minutes. Interviews were conducted in person between October 2025 and March 2026, a period that corresponds with high international tourist arrival volumes in the city. The semi-structured format enabled the researcher to explore key topics such as perceptions of sustainability, interpretation of destination cues, and behavioral adjustments while allowing participants the flexibility to elaborate on their experiences in their own terms. All interviews were conducted in English, audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke, using inductive coding to allow themes to emerge directly from the data rather than imposing predefined categories. The analysis proceeded through familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, review, refinement, and finalization. Coding was carried out manually to ensure close engagement with the data. Throughout the analytical process, attention was given to patterns in how participants interpreted sustainability cues, navigated unfamiliar contexts, and made sense of their behavioral choices.

Several measures were taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. An audit trail documenting analytical decisions, coding revisions, and methodological reflections was maintained. Peer-checking was conducted with a qualitative research colleague who reviewed a subset of transcripts and coding to confirm theme coherence and credibility. Findings are presented with thick and frequent participant quotations to strengthen transparency and interpretive validity.

**Table 1.** Participant Characteristics

| Case | Gender | Age | Country of origin | Visit frequency to HCMC | Trips per year |
|------|--------|-----|-------------------|-------------------------|----------------|
| 1    | Female | 55  | Sweden            | 2nd visit               | 3-4            |
| 2    | Female | 26  | USA               | 1st visit               | 1-2            |
| 3    | Female | 32  | Australia         | 1st visit               | 2-3            |
| 4    | Male   | 24  | USA               | 1st visit               | 1-2            |
| 5    | Female | 26  | Australia         | 1st visit               | 2-3            |
| 6    | Male   | 42  | Thailand          | 4th visit               | 3-5            |
| 7    | Male   | 43  | Indonesia         | 3rd visit               | 3              |
| 8    | Female | 35  | Switzerland       | 1st visit               | 4              |
| 9    | Male   | 34  | Singapore         | 3rd visit               | 4              |

| Case | Gender | Age | Country of origin | Visit frequency to HCMC | Trips per year |
|------|--------|-----|-------------------|-------------------------|----------------|
| 10   | Female | 59  | Canada            | 2nd visit               | 3              |
| 11   | Male   | 62  | France            | 3rd visit               | 3–4            |
| 12   | Female | 45  | Netherlands       | 1st visit               | 2–3            |
| 13   | Female | 26  | Germany           | 2nd visit               | 2              |
| 14   | Female | 29  | Australia         | 1st visit               | 2              |
| 15   | Female | 37  | South Korea       | 2nd visit               | 3–4            |
| 16   | Male   | 51  | Russia            | 1st visit               | 1-2            |
| 17   | Male   | 56  | China             | 2nd visit               | 2-3            |
| 18   | Female | 45  | USA               | 1st visit               | 3-4            |
| 19   | Female | 57  | South Korea       | 1st visit               | 1-2            |
| 20   | Male   | 34  | Japan             | 1st visit               | 3              |

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed. All participants were provided with clear information about the study and gave informed consent prior to participation. Participation was strictly voluntary, and respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Identifying details were removed during transcription, and pseudonyms were used in reporting.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Making Sense of Sustainability Abroad

International tourists did not describe sustainability as a fixed set of practices carried from home. Their understanding evolved as they encountered the social, environmental, and infrastructural realities of Ho Chi Minh City, gradually adjusting their expectations to what they perceived as achievable within the local context.

For many participants, comparisons with their home countries became the starting point for interpreting sustainability in Ho Chi Minh City. A Swedish traveler shared that at home “plastic straws are heavily restricted,” but after noticing that “some cafés here use paper straws,” she took this as a positive sign that businesses were “trying within their limits,” prompting her to lower the rigidity of her expectations and focus on achievable actions (Case 1). She came to view sustainability less as adherence to a universal standard and more as an appreciation of what local businesses were able to achieve under their own conditions.

Tourists also read environmental cues from the city traffic density, visible waste, transportation options, and energy use to make sense of how sustainability could be practiced. An Australian visitor explained that she usually uses public transportation “because it’s cheaper and better for the environment,” but in Ho Chi Minh City she “didn’t feel safe walking to bus stops” and the metro “wasn’t useful for most places,” leading her to rely on ride-hailing despite her intentions (Case 5). A similar experience was reported by another participant, who explained that exploring the city on foot was often impractical because sidewalks were discontinuous or occupied by motorbikes, making low-impact mobility difficult to sustain in practice: “Walking sounded like the sustainable option, but it just wasn’t realistic because the sidewalks were so difficult to use.” (Case 18).

Cues from tourism businesses further shaped tourists' interpretations. A Swiss participant who always carried a personal water bottle noted the absence of refill stations and reflected that "there's no real way to avoid buying bottled water here," even though hotels encouraged reducing single-use plastics (Case 8). Conversely, a Dutch traveler observed the widespread use of plastic in convenience stores and souvenir shops and interpreted it as evidence that "businesses aren't fully aligned with sustainability yet," leading her to scale back expectations during the trip (Case 12).

Social cues from residents and other tourists also guided sensemaking. A visitor from Singapore compared Ho Chi Minh City with Hong Kong, explaining that in Hong Kong "clear signage makes it easy to know what's expected," whereas in Ho Chi Minh City he needed to "figure things out on [his] own," including what counted as appropriate or sustainable behavior (Case 9). An American tourist described confusion when denied entry to a temple due to clothing rules, realizing that "local expectations aren't obvious if you're not used to them" (Case 4). These moments highlight how tourists interpret cultural norms through observation, trial-and-error, and comparison.

Overall, participants did not simply transfer sustainability practices from home to the destination. Instead, they continuously interpreted environmental, commercial, and social signals before deciding what forms of sustainable behaviour were both appropriate and achievable within the local context. Their accounts demonstrate that sustainability abroad emerged through ongoing interpretation rather than through the direct application of pre-existing routines.

#### **4.2 Contextual Constraints and Conflicting Signals**

While tourists initially attempted to act sustainably in Ho Chi Minh City, they quickly encountered a series of contextual constraints that limited, altered, or reversed their intentions. These constraints - environmental, infrastructural, and systemic - shaped how visitors interpreted what was realistically possible, often pushing them toward less sustainable choices despite their preferences.

One of the most immediate barriers was the physical environment, particularly heat, humidity, and traffic conditions. A French visitor commented that although he "would normally walk to reduce emissions," the intense heat and motorcycle congestion made walking feel "unsafe and exhausting," leading him to rely on ride-hailing instead (Case 11). Similarly, several tourists emphasized the lack of continuous sidewalks, noting that broken pavements or motorbikes on walkways made it difficult to choose low-impact mobility options. An American traveler shared, "I wanted to explore the city on foot, but the sidewalks kept disappearing. It wasn't practical" (Case 2).

Practical limitations in urban facilities created additional challenges for participants attempting to maintain their usual sustainability practices. The absence of water refill stations was repeatedly noted, especially by participants accustomed to refill cultures. A Swiss participant said, "I carry my bottle everywhere, but here there's nowhere to refill it. I've had to buy plastic bottles every day" (Case 8). Others mentioned the inconsistency in waste-sorting systems: bins were labeled differently across districts, or not present at all, making it difficult to recycle. A German visitor explained, "Even when I wanted to sort my trash, I couldn't figure out where anything was supposed to go" (Case 13).

Participants also described situations in which sustainability messages appeared inconsistent with everyday business practices. Several described experiencing mild forms of greenwashing, where businesses displayed "eco" labels that were not substantiated by practice. A traveler noted that her hotel advertised "environmentally friendly operations," yet "every breakfast item was wrapped in plastic," which made her

question the sincerity of the claim (Case 5). Another visitor observed that some cafés promoted “eco-straws” but still provided “multiple single-use items,” producing a sense of inconsistency (Case 15).

Tourists also struggled with inconsistent or unclear information from businesses and public facilities. A Singaporean traveler described seeing signs encouraging reduced plastic use, yet noticed that shops continued to distribute plastic bags automatically: “The message and the practice didn’t match, so I stopped trying to follow it strictly” (Case 9). A similar experience was reported by another participant, who remarked that sustainability messages often appeared symbolic rather than practical: “You see signs asking people to be eco-friendly, but it’s hard to follow them when the facilities don’t really support it” (Case 19). Such inconsistencies left participants uncertain about which sustainability practices were genuinely encouraged or realistically achievable.

Faced with these recurring obstacles, many participants acknowledged adjusting their expectations and choosing options that were more practical within the local setting. A Swiss participant summarized this shift: “I tried to be responsible, but after a few days I just did what was easiest because the system didn’t support the alternatives” (Case 8).

Across these accounts, participants consistently described adapting their understanding of sustainable behaviour to the practical realities they encountered during the trip. The interviews suggest that contextual conditions did not simply constrain behaviour; they also reshaped what tourists considered to be a realistic expression of sustainability in the destination.

#### **4.3 Micro-practices and the Negotiated Self of a ‘Good Tourist’**

Despite the structural constraints and conflicting sustainability signals they encountered, many international tourists continued to engage in small but intentional sustainable actions during their stay in Ho Chi Minh City. These micro-practices modest, manageable, and individually controlled allowed visitors to preserve a sense of being a “good tourist,” even when broader environmental infrastructures made larger sustainable behaviors difficult to sustain.

Participants commonly mentioned energy-saving behaviors and limiting their use of hotel amenities. An American visitor noted that he “turned off the AC every time [he] left the room” because it felt like “the least [he] could do” (Case 4). Similarly, a Canadian tourist described that she avoided using complimentary toiletries, relying instead on reusable products she brought from home, explaining that “it cuts down on waste, even if just a little” (Case 10). These small choices were framed not as grand environmental gestures but as accessible adjustments that aligned with personal values.

Tourists also sought out actions that supported the local economy. A Dutch participant explained that she preferred buying from small stalls rather than chain stores because it “felt more sustainable and more supportive of local people” (Case 12). For others, reusing bags and water bottles served as daily rituals reinforcing their environmental identity. A Swiss visitor carried a reusable tote “so [she] wouldn’t come back with piles of plastic bags” (Case 8), while an Australian traveler reused the same bottle for several days, refilling it at her hotel even though public refill stations were scarce (Case 5). Such micro-practices allowed tourists to maintain continuity with their habitual sustainability routines at home while adapting to local limitations.

However, these actions were not implemented without tension. Tourists continuously negotiated between competing demands:

- (1) the desire to act responsibly,
- (2) the need to remain comfortable while traveling, and
- (3) the practical constraints of Ho Chi Minh City's environment and infrastructure.

An American traveler articulated this negotiation clearly: "I want to be responsible, but I also need to enjoy the trip... sometimes you just have to compromise" (Case 2). Similarly, a Singaporean tourist described balancing his wish to minimize plastic with "the reality that convenience sometimes wins when you're on holiday" (Case 9). These negotiations reflect how visitors managed their moral identity while navigating a dense, high-temperature, and often unpredictable urban landscape.

These tensions produced distinct moral emotions, particularly eco-guilt and eco-relief. A Dutch visitor expressed guilt "every time [she] bought another plastic bottle," even when she acknowledged there were few alternatives (Case 12). In contrast, tourists also described moments of eco-relief small emotional rewards when they succeeded in acting sustainably. A Swedish traveler shared that finding a café willing to refill her bottle gave her an unexpected "little sense of victory" (Case 1).

The findings suggest that sustainable behaviour during travel was shaped through an ongoing process of balancing personal values with the practical realities of the destination. In this context, micro-practices became meaningful expressions of responsibility, allowing participants to act in ways that remained consistent with their values even when ideal forms of sustainability were not achievable.

## 5. Discussion

This study contributes to sustainable tourism research by showing that international tourists' sustainability practices abroad emerge from a dynamic process of meaning-making rather than from pre-existing behavioral scripts. Drawing from sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995), the findings demonstrate that visitors in Ho Chi Minh City first interpret the destination's environmental, infrastructural, and social cues before deciding what constitutes reasonable and achievable sustainability in context. Rather than introducing a new theoretical process, this study elaborates how sensemaking unfolds in sustainable tourism by showing how tourists reinterpret destination cues before adapting their sustainability practices to local circumstances. This extends the application of sensemaking into sustainable tourism, a field where interpretive processes have been acknowledged but rarely theorized directly. Rather than assuming that tourists simply carry their attitudes across borders, this study shows that they actively reconstruct the meaning of sustainability when confronted with unfamiliar conditions.

Synthesizing the three themes, the analysis suggests a concise process through which sustainability is redefined abroad: Consistent with Weick's (1995) view of sensemaking as an interpretive process linking environmental cues and action, the three themes show how tourists progressively redefine what sustainability means within the destination context. Tourists engage with the cues embedded in the destination waste visibility, traffic, heat, business claims, signage, and the behaviors of residents and other visitors. They then interpret these cues through comparison with home-country norms, assessments of feasibility, and judgements of credibility. This interpretive work leads to recalibrated sustainability standards, which shift from highly idealized notions to "good enough" or situationally appropriate expectations. Finally, these revised standards produce micro-practices such as energy saving, limiting amenities, reusing bags or bottles, and selectively supporting local vendors. These small actions may appear modest, but they represent the final step in a complex sensemaking process that links contextual realities with moral aspirations.

The findings also offer a reinterpretation of the widely documented attitude–behavior gap (Barr et al., 2011; Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014; Higham et al., 2016; Nieto-García et al., 2024). While prior studies often attribute the gap to weak intentions or insufficient environmental concern, this study shows that international tourists do not lack intention. Instead, they reframe their standards in response to contextual constraints such as limited waste-sorting systems, the absence of refill stations, inconsistent signage, and ambiguous or contradictory sustainability claims. In this sense, the gap is not a failure of commitment but an outcome of interpretive negotiation: tourists adjust what “counts” as sustainability based on what the destination makes possible, socially legible, and morally defensible. This perspective aligns with prior work emphasizing the role of contextual and cultural factors in shaping tourist behavior (Reisinger & Turner, 2003; Nguyen et al., 2022) but further explains how such factors are cognitively processed into action. Compared with conventional attitude, norm, or intention-based explanations, the present study highlights interpretation as the mechanism through which contextual conditions are translated into behavioral adjustment.

From a managerial perspective, these insights underscore the importance of reducing interpretive ambiguity. Tourists’ sensemaking was frequently hindered by inconsistent or conflicting signals, such as uneven recycling infrastructure or symbolic “eco” gestures that did not align with actual practices. Standardizing sustainability messaging across districts, attractions, and businesses would ease the interpretive burden and enable visitors to act more consistently. Equally important is the creation of green-by-default infrastructures including water refill stations, clear waste-sorting systems, and accessible low-emission mobility options that make sustainable choices convenient rather than effortful. Finally, destinations must avoid sending contradictory cues: greenwashing or unaligned eco-claims not only diminish trust but also disrupt the sensemaking process that guides behavioral adjustment. Strengthening the alignment between message and practice would both support tourists’ sustainability efforts and reinforce the destination’s credibility.

Overall, the findings suggest that sustainable behaviour during travel is shaped through continuous interaction between personal values and destination realities. Instead of applying fixed sustainability standards, tourists adjust their everyday practices in ways they consider both meaningful and achievable within the local context. This perspective offers a more nuanced understanding of how sustainability is interpreted and enacted in unfamiliar destinations. In doing so, the study provides an interpretive explanation of how sustainability meanings are reconstructed in unfamiliar destinations, thereby addressing an important gap in sustainable tourism research.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study examined how international tourists interpret and practice sustainability while navigating the complex social, cultural, and infrastructural landscape of Ho Chi Minh City. The findings demonstrate that sustainability abroad is not a stable set of behaviors carried intact from home but a dynamic process of redefinition and negotiation. Tourists actively made sense of destination cues, recalibrated their sustainability standards in response to local constraints, and enacted small but meaningful micro-practices that aligned with what felt both morally coherent and practically feasible. These findings highlight the value of applying a sensemaking perspective to understand how sustainability is constructed in situ rather than assumed as a fixed attribute of the traveler.

The study offers two key contributions. First, it extends sensemaking into sustainable tourism by showing that tourists interpret unfamiliar environments before determining how to act within them. More

specifically, it clarifies how tourists reinterpret destination conditions before adapting their sustainability practices. Second, it provides an empirically grounded process model illustrating how cues lead to interpretations, which in turn shape recalibrated standards and small-scale sustainability practices. This framework advances explanations of why the attitude-behavior gap persists in international contexts, not because visitors lack intention, but because they continuously reframe what sustainability means under new conditions.

The study also has limitations. Although the sample included international tourists with diverse demographic and travel backgrounds, it remained confined to a single urban destination, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could broaden comparative insights by examining multiple destinations with different infrastructural or cultural profiles or by conducting cross-national studies to assess how home-country norms influence sensemaking abroad. Quantitative follow-up research, such as surveys or experimental designs, may also help test and validate the proposed process model at larger scales.

Overall, the study underscores that sustainable tourism abroad is best understood as a situated, interpretive, and negotiated process, shaped by how visitors make sense of the world around them. By clarifying the interpretive mechanisms linking contextual cues with behavioral adjustment, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of sustainable tourist behavior in unfamiliar destination contexts.

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