

The Importance of Traveler Self-Presentation in Ecotourism

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To effectively evaluate the performance of the tourism industry in terms of sustainability, it is important to understand how consumers self-present with regard to sustainable development and practices. This study presents a covert methodological approach to achieve this endeavor. The study reveals that despite the concept of “ecofeminism” feminizing “nature,” when it comes to tourism or leisure activities, women do not primarily self-present through ecotourism. By using a dating app as a data collection platform, this study is offering an innovative way to explore the topic of self-presentation, as this is a key concept in research on dating apps. Additionally, because dating apps access the personal life of individuals, it offers an opportunity to fully investigate the role and importance (attitude behavior gap) of nature as part of women’s leisure activities.

Key words: Ecotourism; Sustainability; Tourism; Self-presentation; Women; Covert research

Introduction

Sustainability, which relies on finding a balance among different factors such as economic benefits of an industry, the consumption of natural resources, and the happiness and quality of life of citizens (Blazquez-Salom et al., 2023), is a primary challenge for the 21st century (Higham et al., 2022; Visser, 2015). As tourism is a major driver of global mobility (Duignan et al., 2022), sustainability is subsequently a major challenge for the industry (Higham et al., 2022; Sloan et al., 2013). In the endeavor to reach a certain level of sustainability, a variety of strategies have been put in place by stakeholders in charge of the management of the tourism industry, but many have so far failed

(Burrai et al., 2019; Higham et al., 2022). Indeed, the return of overtourism after the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic is further evidence that the industry has still not reached its objective in terms of sustainability (Hotel News Resource, 2022).

This study is concerned specifically with “ecotourism,” which refers to “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education” (The International Ecotourism Society, 2015; see also Bonye et al., 2022). Ecotourism is also defined as “tourism to natural areas that supports environmental conservation, social equity and environmental education in an effort to maintain economic viability without degrading the host environment” (Powell & Ham,

2008, p. 468). There is no agreed definition (Deng & Li, 2015), but whatever definition of ecotourism is adopted, as nature is fundamentally central, along a broad spectrum of “hard” through to “soft” ecotourism experiences.

There is often a difference between what individuals claim about the way they behave and actual practice, which impacts negatively the sustainability of the tourism industry (Beall & Boley, 2022; Caruana et al., 2016; Gneezy, 2017; White et al., 2019). This view is further supported by Mkono et al. (2020), who argued that despite tourism consumers claiming to care about social and environmental impact, most of them are not actually ready to change behavior. Juvan and Dolnicar’s (2014) study revealed that even “environmental activists” who are highly aware of negative impacts, and feel uncomfortable about them, tend to justify actions rather than change behaviors.

This study argues that to accurately evaluate the performance of the industry in terms of sustainability, it is important to understand the intention/attitude and behavior gap. The existing body of research (Guzman et al., 2021; Hewlett et al., 2017; Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014; Mkono et al., 2020) exclusively investigates sustainability (in tourism) using an overt approach, defined as an approach requesting the researcher to disclose his/her real identity, and the real purpose of the research, as opposed to covert research (Lugosi, 2006). The main limitation of covert approach is that respondents tend to conform their answers to a norm to avoid negative reactions from others (Pontari & Glenn, 2012; Rui & Stefanone, 2013). Because this study is based on a covert approach, it enables greater insight into communications that encourage new behaviors through working at the level of deeper values and beliefs. This study suggests a methodological approach based on “self-presentation” to identify this gap. To the best of the authors’ knowledge, there is no research introducing self-presentation as a sustainability indicator. It is also interesting from the perspective that engagement in sustainable related activities such as ecotourism is often used on social media platforms to attain a “social return” (Beall & Boley, 2022).

To address the importance of self-presentation as a sustainability indicator, this study focuses on ecotourism as a segment of the tourism industry

(Beall & Boley, 2022) and, specifically, on women as important stakeholders and consumers of the industry (Lenao & Basupi, 2016). Data were collected through a dating app to collect photos with regard to women’s self-presentation (Gunter, 2008) and connections to ecotourism. The research questions (RQs) of the study are as follows:

RQ1: To what extent do women self-present themselves through nature/environment?

RQ2: What is the value added of self-presentation in the quest for sustainability in tourism?

This study is based on content analysis of photos, which are a nonverbal form of communication expressing the identity of the individuals who took and uploaded the photos (Siegel et al., 2023). Photos provide evidence of leisure and tourism activities for credibility, while also inspiring those looking at the photos (Siegel et al., 2023). This means that they can potentially be powerful in triggering both intentions and behaviors associated with sustainable tourism, depending on the content. It is of course necessary to consider in the analysis how photographs (especially on social media) might be staged to look socially desirable. Hancock and Toma (2009) confirmed that both men’s and women’s photos are often retouched. This could be explained by the fact that individuals adapt their self-presentation according to the context whether online (onymous or anonymous) or offline (Mehdizadeh, 2010).

The photos are collected from the dating app *happn*, a social networking site (SNS) that enables users to: create a profile; connect with others; exchange experience; and fulfill their needs to attract attention (Hancock & Toma, 2009; Siegel et al., 2023).

A dating app is used because:

1. Dating apps (self-presentation) and sustainability in tourism are both subjective—that is, based on feelings and perception (Blazquez-Salom et al., 2023).
2. The context offered by dating apps is unique and ideal for impression management (Mehdizadeh, 2010).
3. Dating apps are accessing the private life of individuals (backstage) as relating to their romantic

life (F. Li et al., 2021), part of the meso-system (Pérez-Escamilla & Kac, 2013).

4. Dating apps and self-presentation are closely related as all research on dating apps systematically refer to self-presentation (Alexopoulos et al., 2020; Blackwell et al., 2015; Gunter, 2008; Mehdizadeh, 2010).

This study is exclusively based on data uploaded by women users/daters because:

1. Women are said to be more proenvironment than males (A. K. Kim, 2012; Séraphin, 2024).
2. There are many initiatives to empower women to be involved in ecotourism (Lenao & Basupi, 2016).
3. Women tend to upload more photos on SNS than males (Abramova et al., 2016; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). This is also a limitation, as it is also comparatively more important for women to be perceived positively on SNS (Siegel et al., 2023). This implies that photos may be uploaded to attract social return, and therefore not reflect the true nature of the user (Beall & Boley, 2022).
4. Women disclose more about themselves than men (Manago et al., 2008).
5. Overt research based on 308 questionnaires with 58% of respondents being women by Zalatan and Ramirez Gaston (1996, p. 46) suggested that single (as compared to married) travelers and women travelers are more sensitive to ecotourism.

Literature Review

Self-Presentation and Social Networking Sites (SNSs)

Self-presentation, either private or public, which is at the starting point of the development of relationships among individuals, is a communication management approach used by individuals to control how they are perceived by others (Hollenbaugh, 2021). As part of this communication strategy, individuals select the type of information they want to share, so that others accept the conveyed message (H. W. Kim et al., 2012; Rui & Stefanone, 2013). The targeted individual or audience is an important

part of self-presentation, because without this targeted audience or individual, there is no self-presentation (Hollenbaugh, 2021). Hence the reason why self-presentation is calibrated on the targeted audience (Abramova et al., 2016; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Manago et al., 2008) and assimilated to a performance that is both frontstage and backstage (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). The latter shows all the work that has been done to achieve what is displayed (frontstage) and visible to all online and/or offline (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016).

Two types of self-presentation have been identified, namely, acquisitive self-presentation, which is a positive and attractive presentation of the self to get approval from others, and protective self-presentation, which is a neutral presentation of the self to conform to a norm and avoid rejection (Rui & Stefanone, 2013). Both types of self-presentation are to be related with activism, either passive or active (Esfandiar et al., 2019; Tranter, 2010), knowing that passive activism is defined by Tranter (2010) as a form of activism that does not involve protests, but instead, lobbying backstage for a cause. Active activism is the opposite. As a result, it can involve protests, etc. (Tranter, 2010).

The internet and SNSs enable individuals a way to better self-present (Hollenbaugh, 2021; Rui & Stefanone, 2013). It is even now a recurrent topic when it comes to research on SNSs, such as Facebook, Instagram (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016); MySpace (Hollenbaugh, 2021; Manago et al., 2008); Twitter (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016); Pinterest (McMullen, 2020); dating apps (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). On SNSs, individuals can self-present themselves using a variety of mediums, among these are their favorite music, movies, books, videos, pictures, music, art, blogs, photos, etc. (H. W. Kim et al., 2012; Manago et al., 2008). Photos are the most popular medium of self-presentation on SNSs (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Most of the time, and particularly on dating apps and websites, users tend to engage in frontstage performance to protect their real self (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016).

Behavior related to self-presentation varies according to gender (Manago et al., 2008). Women are more concerned than men about how other comments on their profile (Manago et al., 2008).

On that basis, it can be postulated that women are more likely to adopt a frontstage neutral self-presentation, and that their profile is self-enhanced—in other words, retouched to appear more attractive than it is (Hancock & Toma, 2009). Self-presentation is therefore directly connected with the concept of “narcissism,” which is a need to present the self positively (through physical appearance, intelligence, etc.) to attract others such as romantic partners (Mehdizadeh, 2010). Narcissism is negatively presented, as associated with shallow individuals with low self-esteem (Mehdizadeh, 2010). Still in terms of self-presentation strategies, women tend to use affiliative communication strategies (link/connection with someone or something), whereas men tend to use power and status communication strategies (Manago et al., 2008).

Self-Presentation and Photos on SNSs

Photos (either selfies or taken by someone else) are forms of communication posted by individuals on SNSs to self-present (Vaate et al., 2018). Among the motives listed by Vaate et al. (2018) why individuals take and share photos on SNSs are: entertainment (enjoying taking photos); sharing personal information (tell something about the self to others); social interaction (to communicate remotely with others); social use (to show others what ones do, and convey a personal message); passing time (when bored to kill time); relaxation (it is a relaxing activity for some); imaginary audience (photos posted with a specific audience in mind); social pressure and identity (to meet new people, to feel important, to show a different identity, etc.). Sung et al. (2016) shared the same view as Vaate et al. (2018), but they classified the motives into four main categories: attention-seeking; communication; archiving (recording key moments of life); and entertainment. The context of indoor, outdoor, activities, etc. (Musil et al., 2017), personal life, business life (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016) are also important elements to consider when analyzing a photo (Musil et al., 2017).

Self-Presentation and Photos of Ecotourism on SNSs

Tourism and photographs are closely related, and the fact that tourists take photos on holiday partly

contributes to making them active consumers of their holidays (McMullen, 2020). It is worth noting that 89% of travelers take photos of their experiences and share them on SNSs (McMullen, 2020). Photos shared on SNSs are referred to as user-generated photos (UGP) or consumer-generated photos (CGP) (H. Li et al., 2022). From a tourism point of view, individuals sharing their photos on SNSs are referred to as “trip picture posters” or TPPs (Boley et al., 2013), and the photos shared by the latter are therefore coined by this study as consumers/users trip generated photos (CTGP or UTGP). The photos are also used by destination marketing organizations (DMOs) to figure out how the destination is perceived by visitors, and how to market it best to visitors (McMullen, 2020). McMullen (2020) investigated the historic aspect of the heritage of different destinations and classified the images (buildings, people, maps, signs, attractions) as contemporary or historic images. This study only considers the visual documents (photos) related to scientific heritage, which include plants, birds, natural habitats, parks, protected areas, beaches, rivers, etc. (Park, 2014). Scientific heritage is considered because of its connection with ecotourism (Beall & Boley, 2022).

Self-Presentation as a Research Tool

All academics approach self-presentation as a communication tool (Abramova et al., 2016; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Hollenbaugh, 2021; Manago et al., 2008). A review of the literature on self-presentation indicates that it can also be considered as:

1. An indicator of new social norms, and the extent to which individuals are embracing and adopting them (see for instance Rui & Stefanone, 2013).
2. An indicator of emergence of self-expression tools, and their popularity with individuals (see, for instance, Vaate et al., 2018).
3. As a research tool and/or stage to compare against results of other research approach (see, for instance, McMullen, 2020).
4. A research framework for any constructivist research. The information so far gathered on self-presentation in this study is summarized in

Table 1

Self-Presentation Framework

C1	Stage 1			Stage 2		Stage 3		
	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6			
Self-presentation	Motives	SNSs	Tools	Context	Communication			
Public	Entertainment	Facebook	Photos (CTGP or UTGP, TPPs)	Indoor	Frontstage			
Backstage	Activism (passive/active)	Pinterest	Pictures	Outdoor	Narcissism			
Private	Sharing information	Instagram	Books	Activities	Backstage			
Acquisitive	Social interaction	MySpace	Videos	Private life	Retouched			
Protective	Social uses	Twitter	Blogs	Business life	Authentic/candid			
Frontstage	Passing time	Dating apps/websites	Arts	Beautiful location	Affiliative			
	Relaxation			Famous places	Power/status			
	Imaginary audience			Nature based				
	Social pressure & identity			Nature affinity				
	Attention seeking			Scientific heritage				
	Communication			Ecotourism				
	Archiving							
	Entertainment							

Note. Source: The authors.

Table 1, which provides different stages of the framework. This information is used to structure the Methodology and to some extent the Findings and Discussion sections.

Stage 1: Determining the rationale to collect the data. To do so, it is important to determine which dimension of self-presentation is to be considered (C1) and the rationale to collect the data (C2).

Stage 2: Specifying the source of data collection. This stage provides examples of platforms where data related to self-presentation can be collected (C3).

Stage 3: Specifying the type of data to be collected. This stage discusses the type of data that can be collected from the previously mentioned platform (C4), the context of their collection (C5), alongside the nature of the data (C6).

Methodology

Stage 1: Determining the Rationale to Collect the Data (and the Philosophical Approach)

Covert research is particularly suitable to this study for three main reasons:

1. Research on sustainability and tourism face the issue of “intention behavior gap” or “attitude–behavior gap” (Beall & Boley, 2022), which can be addressed by a covert approach as this approach is going beyond what respondents are willing to share (Lugosi, 2006).
2. Research on content analysis of photos shared by women very often displays frontstage information (as opposed to backstage), which are very often are retouched (backstage) to convey a convenient message (Manago et al., 2008; Siegel et al., 2023), hence the need to an approach that goes beyond what is displayed.
3. Beall and Boley (2022) argued that to gain insight into the expressed intentions of individuals to engage in ecotourism, and their actual engagement, it is better to use a sample of individuals who do not identify as ecotourists as they will not have the background knowledge or experience to provide socially acceptable answers. This study could therefore be said to be covert in the sense that it is using “participants”

who are first and foremost single women looking for a partner (and not ecotourists). Having said that, it does not mean that these women are not ecotourists.

- 4. Research discussing the self-identification of ecotourists is based on overt research such as surveys and interviews (Deng & Li, 2015; Nutsugbodo et al., 2020). Respondents to these studies are selected on the basis that they self-identify as ecotourists (Deng & Li, 2015). The intention gap behavior was not considered (Beall & Boley, 2022; Deng & Li, 2015). Additionally, for reliability and validity reasons, Beall and Boley (2022) suggested that for surveys on ecotourism to be considered reliable it is better not to select individuals self-representing themselves as such, as they might provide socially acceptable answers.

The study adopts an ecotourism feminist positioning as only data from women are collected. This approach is influenced by:

- 1. The concept of “ecofeminism,” an approach that feminized “nature” in reference to the term “mother nature” (Bloomfield, 2021).
- 2. The belief that without real involvement and consideration of women in tourism, sustainability in tourism is not possible (Alarcon & Cole, 2019).
- 3. Values such as care, solidarity, and human rights, which are feminist values, can play a major role in addressing sustainability (Higgins-Desbiolles & Monga, 2021; Kalisch & Cole, 2022).
- 4. Women represent most workers in the tourism and hospitality industry (Kalisch & Cole, 2022) and are empowered to be actors in ecotourism (Lenao & Basupi, 2016).

Stage 2: Specifying the Source of Data Collection: Front Stage Photos Uploaded by Single Women on happn

Launched in France in 2014 *happn* is used nowadays by more than 50 million consumers (*happn*, Play Store). It uses geolocation to connect users (Knox et al., 2020), indicating to users where, and how many times they have crossed paths with each other (Ma et al., 2017). Similar to other dating

platforms, *happn* users also provide photos, physical traits, hobbies, text blurb, etc., for self-presentation (Blackwell et al., 2015).

The study is based on women aged 30–53 living in the UK. This age range was chosen because according to the life course framework (Zacher & Froidevaux, 2021) it is during the period of early adulthood (25–39) and middle adulthood (40–60) that most individuals find partners. For this study, 1,100 profiles of women corresponding to 5,048 photos were analyzed (each user on *happn* is able to upload up to 9 photos).

Stage 3: Specifying the Type of Data to be Collected

Table 2 provides a sample of key elements to consider when screening photos uploaded by women daters. The elements are based on The International Ecotourism Society definition (2015). Photos that did not include any of the elements (or similar) listed in Table 1 were not considered in the study.

Photos that were edited and filtered were removed from the list of photos to be considered, to try and ensure a genuine connection to activities associated with ecotourism. These photos can be spotted because they have enhanced contrasts, colors, composition, and have stylized looks (Siegel et al., 2023).

Data Analysis

This study is based on both quantitative and qualitative analysis (Siegel et al., 2023).

Quantitative Data Analysis

Data (photos) related to scientific heritage (Table 1) are classified into two main categories:

- 1. “Water” in reference to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 14: *Life below water*.
- 2. “Land” in reference to SDG 15: *Life on land*.

Relevant photos to the study (related to scientific heritage) are coded as 1. All other photos (irrelevant to the study) are coded as 0 (Table 3). Once the data were coded on an Excel spreadsheet, they

Table 2
Keyword Extraction of Definitions of Ecotourism/Ecotourist (e.g., Indicators of Ecotourism/Ecotourists)

Elements for Screening	Reference(s)
Natural resources/natural scenery/natural environment/natural attractions	Beall and Boley (2022), Blazquez-Salom et al. (2023)
Rural roads	Blazquez-Salom et al. (2023)
Protected landscape/natural resources/undisturbed nature/national parks	Beall and Boley (2022), Blazquez-Salom et al. (2023)
Natural water	Blazquez-Salom et al. (2023)
Underdeveloped landscape	Blazquez-Salom et al. (2023)
Wilderness/wildlife	Beall and Boley (2022)
Observe plant and animal life (flora/fauna)	Beall and Boley (2022)
Lakes & streams	Beall and Boley (2022)
Whale watching	Beall and Boley (2022)
Outdoor activities (skiing, sailing, hiking, cycling, etc.)	
Rock climbing	
Agritourism (farm, etc.)	
Protected area	
Reef barrier	
National park	
Scuba diver	
Fauna/flora	Beall and Boley (2022)
Natural attractions	Beall and Boley (2022)
Handicraft (basketry, etc.)	Lenao and Basupi (2016)

Note. Source: The author.

were uploaded on SPSS™ for descriptive statistical analysis. This software is often used in tourism academic research for statistical analysis (Ayscue et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2020).

Descriptive statistics (using SPSS) were used to identify:

1. The number (frequency) of women daters who uploaded photos related to ecotourism (and/or other nature-based leisure activities) on their profile page (Table 3).
2. The number (frequency) of women daters who uploaded a photo related to ecotourism with regards to the maximum number of photos they are allowed to upload (Table 4).

Qualitative Data Analysis

Figures 1 and 2 provide a list of types of scientific heritage, and related activities conveyed by the photos, respectively. They are listed from the most popular to the least popular.

Findings

Summary

The study reveals women self-present themselves through ecotourism and other nature-based leisure activities (Table 3).

Indeed, 368 photos (35.3% of uploaded photos) are related to this type of activity, which could be

Table 3
Number of Uploaded Specific Photos on *happn* by Women Related to Ecotourism and Other Nature-Based Leisure

	0 (Frequency)	1 (Frequency)	Total	0 (%)	1 (%)	Total (%)
Water	858	242	1100	78.0%	22.0%	100%
Land	954	146	1100	86.7%	13.3%	100%
		368			35.3%	

Note. Source: The authors.

Table 4
Level of Self-Presentation

Level of Self-Presentation	Strenght
0%–10%	Neligeable
11%–39%	Weak
40%–69%	Moderate
70%–89%	Strong
90%–100%	Very strong

Note. Source: The authors (adapted from Silver et al., 2013).

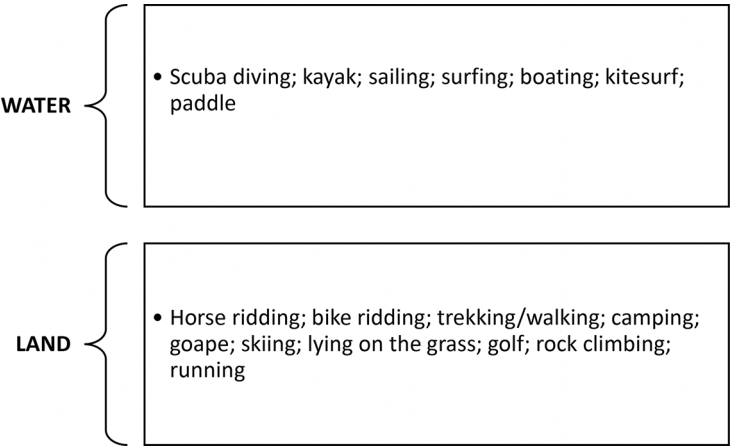


Figure 1. Key features of ecotourism activities self-presenting women.
Source: The authors.

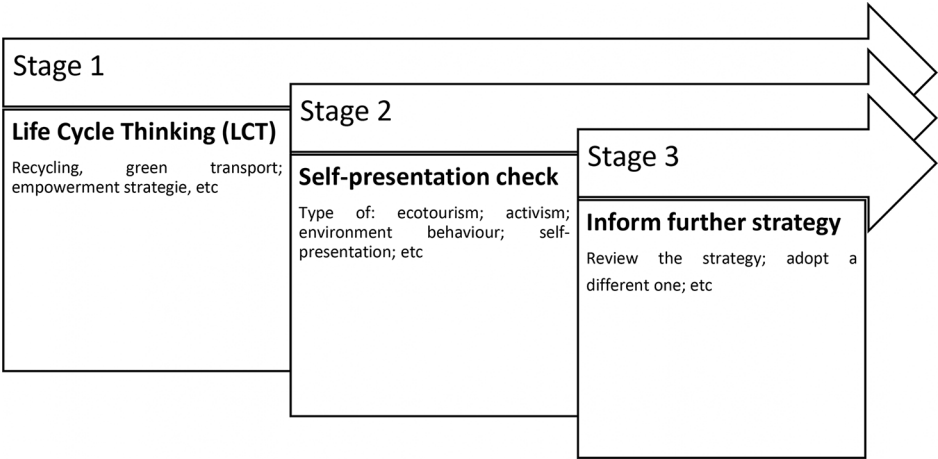


Figure 2. Self-presentation as a research stage and tool. Source: The authors.

considered as weak using an adaptation of the Pearson Product Moment Correlation (Table 4).

Self-presentation through ecotourism-related photos is in the lower quartile of photos uploaded by users. However, the results are in line with existing research, which argued that women are pro-environment (Alarcon & Cole, 2019; Bloomfield, 2021; Higgins-Desbiolles & Monga, 2021; Kalisch & Cole, 2022; Séraphin, 2024).

Women take full advantage of the number of photos they are allowed to upload, as most of them upload the maximum (Table 5). However, when they upload 7 or 8 photos, the number of photos related to ecotourism decreases. These findings support existing research that argued women are open to the idea of sharing information about themselves (Manago et al., 2008) through photos and SNSs (Abramova et al., 2016; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016).

The study (Table 3) also reveals that women mainly represent themselves through water-related activities. Among these are: beach/seaside/ocean, lake, river, canal, waterfall, swamp.

Research on sustainable tourism classifies has pointed out that “water” is often discussed with regard to three main topics, namely: resources, attractions, and hazard (Moyle et al., 2022). In this study, “water” is presented as both a resource and an attraction. Cole (2014) explained that the water element also plays a role in tourists’ health and happiness. Finally, the fact that women upload a significant number of photos displaying beaches/seaside and related activities can also be related to a form of passive low-cost behavior related to body positivity.

Land related locations include: countryside (forest, wood, mountain & wildlife), park, garden, farm, cliff, desert.

Table 5
Number (Frequency) of Women Consumers and Number of Uploaded Photos Related to Ecotourism and Other Nature-Based Leisure

No. of Pictures	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Water	4	4	15	31	43	39	30	28	48
Land	0	1	7	17	23	28	23	18	29
Water + land	4	5	22	48	66	67	53	46	77

Note. Source: The authors.

Land protection is important in the quest for a sustainable form of tourism. Chancellor et al. (2011) argued that: “land trusts have proved economically viable and effective methods for protecting natural areas” (p. 863).

The most common activities related to water and land are shown in Figure 1.

The location and activities displayed in the photos uploaded on the dating app are related to tourism consumption values such as sustainability, place attachment, well-being, environmental protection, empowerment, etc. (Hammerton, 2017; Hyman, 2014; Newsome et al., 2002; Saar et al., 2021; Towner, 2018).

Key Traits of Women Self-Presentation With Regards to Ecotourism

Neutral and Socially Conservative Presentation of the Self. On *happn* womens’ profiles are visible to 50 million users (*happn*, Play Store), meaning they are finding themselves in an environment of individuals unknown to them. Adopting a protective self-environment is understandable. This is an all the more understandable approach as women particularly worry about how they are perceived on SNSs (Siegel et al., 2023). When in an environment surrounded by close friends, family, etc., individuals tend to adopt a more acquisitive self-presentation to express their identity. However, when in an environment where the others are not known (or not very well), individuals develop a form of anxiety, and as a result, adopt a more protective self-presentation (Pontari & Glenn, 2012). This is a neutral and socially conservative presentation of the self to conform to a norm and avoid rejection (Pontari & Glenn, 2012; Rui & Stefanone, 2013), and embarrassment related to negative evaluation (Pontari & Glenn, 2012). The protective self-presentation is not about looking good, but mostly about not looking bad to avoid too much attention to their abilities, belief, etc. (Schutz, 1998). Protective self-presentation can also convey a negative image of someone, as it can sometimes be associated with being unfriendly and cold (Pontari & Glenn, 2012).

Protective Self-Presentation and Confirmation to Social Norms. When sharing photos of nature-based activities, women are merely sharing their interests

for ecotourism and nature-based leisure activities; their ecotourism and leisure pride; their biospheric values (Balundé et al., 2019); and their proenvironment behavior (Thøgersen & Crompton, 2009). In their protective self-presentation approach, they are also conforming to a social norm related to the growing trend towards ecoguilt and shame related to holiday choices (Mkono & Hughes, 2020). Therefore, individuals are likely to take any opportunity to display positive behavior and conform to social norms (Han, 2021; Mkono & Hughes, 2020). Women may also conform to the social norm regarding connection with the environment as a contributor to an improvement in mental health and well-being (Guzman et al., 2021; Hewlett et al., 2017).

Passive Activism and Low-Cost Environmental Behavior. The self-presentation and communication of women could be said to be part of their private sphere, as the photos are only displaying consumer behavior without references to any policy or support to a cause (Thøgersen & Crompton, 2009). Women's protective private self-presentation could be said to be a form of "passive activism" as defined by Tranter (2010), which does not involve protests, but instead, lobbying backstage for a cause. This passive form of activism is assimilated to low-cost proenvironment behavior, which involves minimal investments, as opposed to high-cost behavior, which is more active, and more demanding such as picking up litter, etc. (Esfandiar et al., 2019).

Soft Ecotourism and Passive Activism. Both passive activism and low-cost proenvironment behavior are to be related to soft ecotourism, which are taken by consumers who incorporate some nature-related activities. As they still need a certain level of comfort and type of service, they do not consider themselves as dedicated environmentalists (Singh et al., 2006). They can therefore be considered as passive activists (Tranter, 2010).

Contribution Statements and Conclusion

Self-Presentation as a Research Stage and Tool

As discussed above, academic research on self-presentation is a communication strategy used by individuals to introduce themselves to others

(Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019) either online and/or face-to-face (Siegel et al., 2023) to either influence them or share beliefs or thoughts about something (H. W. Kim et al., 2012). As a communication strategy, self-presentation also sheds light on how important others are in the process (Hollenbaugh, 2021), and the discrepancy in terms of gender (Manago et al., 2008). This study goes a step further by introducing self-presentation as a verification stage and strategy for researchers and/or practitioners in tourism to verify whether the strategy for sustainable tourism put in place is working or not. In other terms, this study argues that self-presentation could be used as a triangulation strategy within a (longitudinal) research approach.

In the case of ecotourism and/or nature-based leisure activities, self-presentation could be used to check whether implemented strategies (life cycle thinking) such as recycling, reusing, buying green products and services (Han, 2021), green transport (Miller et al., 2015), empowerment of women involved in ecotourism (Lenao & Basupi, 2016), etc., work or not. This is important due to the existence of the behavior/attitude gap behavior (which is not considered in studies such as Deng & Li, 2015). The approach suggested by the study is as shown in Figure 2.

Failing to implement this approach (Fig. 2) would enable tourism organizations and other stakeholders to analyze their communication strategies. This study has provided a specific example of the application of self-presentation to ecotourism and has evidenced that life cycle thinking applies as women self-present themselves through ecotourism (even if moderated).

Challenge Related to Self-Presentation

The challenge related to self-presentation is the identification of the most suitable platform and audience to use to collect data from (with regard to the effectiveness of an implemented strategy). To guarantee the validity and reliability of the data collected, it is important that both the platform and the targeted respondents are not directly connected to the investigated topic to avoid the temptation to provide information fitting social norms and trends. A covert approach is also necessary for this endeavor. By adopting this strategy, the

study demonstrates a research radical innovation, as opposed to incremental innovation. The latter is the reason why many of the strategies towards sustainability in tourism have so far failed as they do not differ enough with the existing approach adopted (Brooker & Joppe, 2014). In the same way that Burrai et al. (2019) called for a rethinking of the ideology of responsible tourism, this study calls for a rethinking of the research approach of ecotourism, and more broadly thinking, sustainable tourism.

Additional Indicator to Evaluate Consumers' Ecotourism Intention

Research carried out by Beall and Boley (2022) pointed out that existing studies have identified five criteria to evaluate tourists' ecotourism intentions, namely: nature interest (wilderness, undisturbed nature, etc.); education (opportunities to learn about flora, fauna, etc.); environmental sustainability (minimize negative impacts on local community and environment; support actions to support conservative initiatives, etc.); economic sustainability (consuming local products and services, etc.); and sociocultural sustainability (respect locals and their culture, getting familiar to local language and culture, etc.). These five criteria contributing to the Ecotourism Identification Scale (EIS) developed by Beall and Boley (2022) capture the public aspect of individuals' life. This study adds "the selection of companion" (romantic or not) and reveals that

women using this added indicator have five main traits (Fig. 3).

Due to the weak self-presentation of women to ecotourism and nature-based leisure activities (Table 4) more work needs to be done by stakeholders and consumers of tourism products and services. The results of the study are in line with Mkono et al. (2020), who argued that most people are not genuinely ready to adopt a sustainable form of tourism. This could be related to the narcissistic nature of individuals (Mehdizadeh, 2010). Indeed, as this study revealed, only 35.3% of the photos focus on ecotourism-related leisure activities. Most of the pictures are self-image (37%), with a focus on physical characteristics (weight, hairstyle, teeth, and other physical assets, etc.). Other photos are about:

- 12.3% are related to the hospitality sector (food and drinks served in bars and restaurants),
- 9.6% are related to cultural matters (castles, religious and cultural landmarks, art, etc.),
- 5.8% are related to events (private and public).

Other Contributions of the Study

Spill-Over to Private Life. Sustainability is permeating even the private life of individuals (choice of romantic companion). However, there are no sustainability (tourism) policies, regulations, guidelines, etc., about who (selective criteria) individuals should pick as their romantic partner. The study

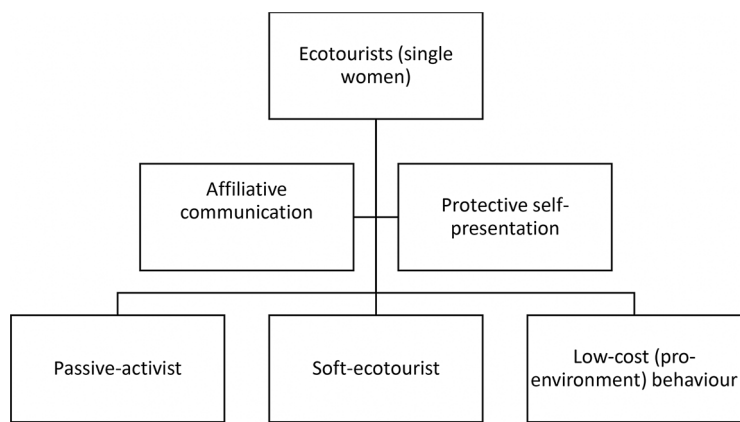


Figure 3. Criteria part of the Ecotourist Identification Scale (EIS). Source: The authors.

poses that if there is no coercive power (Saito & Ruhanen, 2017), it means that behaving that way is important for that person. In the long term, it could encourage others—that is, the romantic partners (and potentially their personal and professional network)—to adopt proenvironmental behavior (Maki et al., 2016).

Tourism Products and Services Providers' Strategies. This study has provided two types of information that can be particularly important for DMOs. First, that they should go beyond collecting primary data using overt research methods because they might take actions based on information that is not reflective of the true belief and needs of customers. Second, the study has also revealed the most popular type of nature-based activities among single women (Fig. 1). Tourism products and services providers can use the information to improve what they have on offer and/or create new products and services for this target market. This is all the more important as the self-presentation of women through ecotourism and nature-based tourism is weak. Research carried out by Nutsugbodo et al. (2020) revealed that appropriate communication, education, activities, etc., play a significant role in the empowerment of women in ecotourism.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

Future research could look at investigating the background of the women who self-present as pro-environment and ecotourists. To be able to have a specific pen portrait, an overt research method could be used, aligning with research methods typically used in dating apps to date. This includes online surveys (Alexopoulos et al., 2020), semistructured interview (Blackwell et al., 2015), or mixed methods (Abramova et al., 2016) could be used.

Future research could also investigate if women are successful on the dating app bearing in mind that protective self-presentation can convey a negative image of someone, and make this person look unfriendly and cold (Pontari & Glenn, 2012). Second, do they attract men with similar belief in terms of tourism consumption (H. W. Kim et al., 2012).

Overt research on self-identification to ecotourism conducted by Deng and Li (2015) revealed

that: “self-identified ecotourists were found to be more environmentally concerned and responsible, more dedicated to nature, more supportive of tourism accreditation programs” (p. 255). Would covert research considering the intention behavior gap provide the same results?

In terms of limitations, this study is based exclusively on data collected from single women. Based on the fact there is a discrepancy between men and women in terms of ecotourism and proenvironment behavior (A. K. Kim, 2012; Séraphin, 2024; Zalatan & Ramirez Gaston, 1996), this approach is relevant and important. This limitation is also mitigated by the fact that it is likely that the self-presentation of women daters is similar to men in that when self-presenting there is a common need to “align their public images with audience expectations” (Siegel et al., 2023, p. 2335). This view is also shared by Rui and Stefanone (2013), who argued that individuals adjust their public images according to audience expectations, meaning that if women self-present themselves as ecotourists and nature-based leisure consumers, it means men expect this.

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