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Self-Transcendence and Self-Enhancement Values as Drivers of Eco-Travel Behavior. Implications for Business Strategies for Eco-Tourism Sector

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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism encourages environmentally friendly travel; however, little is known about the underlying value systems influencing travelers' choices and actions. This study uses a mixed-method methodology that combines post hoc qualitative analysis with a large-scale quantitative survey to examine the influence of multiple value dimensions on ecotourism attitudes and behavior. Drawing on the value–attitude–behavior (VAB) framework, the quantitative phase tests how altruism, biospheric values, tranquility, and need for achievement influence attitudes toward ecotourism, intention to visit eco-destinations, and willingness to pay a premium. Results reveal that tranquility and achievement values are positively associated with ecotourism attitudes. Altruism and biospheric values do not significantly influence ecotourism attitudes. Ecotourism attitudes positively associate with intention to visit an eco-destination, influencing willingness to pay. The post hoc qualitative study explains why tranquility and the need for achievement emerge as stronger drivers than environmental values and identifies boundary conditions, including convenience, trust, and social influence, that shape the link between attitude, intention, and behavior. Furthermore, insights from the qualitative study are used to develop a CRED framework (Credibility, Relaxation, Experience, and Distinction) that offers actionable business strategies for destination managers and eco-tourism marketers. Finally, the findings of this study explain how value systems guide behavior and provide practitioners with tailored approaches to design and promote sustainable travel experiences.

1 | Introduction

Hospitality has been related to habitat destruction, food and water waste, and labor abuse in nature-rich areas (Khater et al. 2024). The increase in awareness regarding these hospitality issues has made eco-tourism the fastest-growing tourism sector, predicted to reach a market size of USD 785 billion by 2031 at a CAGR of 15.5% between 2024 and 2031 (Skyquest 2024). Ecotourism offers a lucrative industry with comparatively lesser

negative environmental impact, educates tourists, and promotes social welfare among the local populace (De Grosbois and Fennell 2021). However, poorly planned ecotourism businesses may negatively impact the environment and the residents (Lee and Jan 2018). Private players and the local community need funds to manage the eco-sensitive areas properly. Consumers say through their willingness to stay and pay premium for eco-tourism services can ensure that eco-tourism destinations follow the right standards and help preserve the environment.

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Nonetheless, the question remains: What can make consumers desire to visit eco-destinations and pay a premium for the environmental and societal benefits eco-tourism provides?

Scholars utilize situation-specific models, such as the travel career model (Pearce and Lee 2005), and attitudinal models (Ahmad et al. 2020; Qiu et al. 2022), such as the theory of planned behavior (TPB), to explore and examine the attitudes/intentions of consumers to choose an eco-destination. Since situation-specific models vary across situations and attitudinal models might suffer from attitude-behavior gaps, scholars suggest that incorporating personal values to examine the attitude and intention to visit eco-destination might help reduce the attitude-behavior gap (Ashraf et al. 2019; Ahmad et al. 2020; Meng et al. 2020).

Personal values transcend situations and act as desired end goals, forming an individual's attitudes and behaviors (Schwartz 1992). Scholars (Landon et al. 2018; Ahmad et al. 2020; Zhang et al. 2023) demonstrate that environmental values of altruism and biosphere positively predict the intention to visit eco-destinations, indicating that people engage in eco-tourism for the benefit of the environment and other people. However, Blamey and Braithwaite (1997) opine that eco-tourism is not limited to individuals possessing strong environmental values. Travelers also seek personal benefits like relaxation, adventure, and cultural enrichment. For example, travelers might choose to explore an eco-tourist destination to support conservation efforts to feel a warm glow, experience the tranquility of natural surroundings, enjoy thrilling activities like zip-lining, or immerse themselves in local traditions. To this end, the relevance of self-enhancing values of tranquility and the need for achievement cannot be ignored. In fact, tourism association with hedonism might make these values even more relevant than environmental values.

This study argues that self-transcendence (altruism and biospheric) and self-enhancement values (tranquility and need for achievement) influence willingness to pay premium (WTPP). Accordingly, this study answers the following research question: How do environmental values (biosphere, altruism) and self-enhancing values (tranquility and need for achievement) influence WTPP through attitude and intention to visit eco-destinations? In addition, the post hoc qualitative study explains why these relationships exist, boundary conditions under which they exist, and helps develop strategies to increase WTPP.

This study adopts a sequential mixed methods design to examine the role of values in shaping eco-tourism attitudes and behaviors and answers the above-mentioned research questions (Tsetse et al. 2024). Two hundred ninety-six respondents' data are analyzed using structural equation modeling. The VAB framework explains how personal values guide the formation of attitudes, influencing behavioral intentions and actions. Environmental orientations are reflected in altruistic values and biospheric values. Self-enhancement motivations are represented by tranquility and the need for achievement. These values act as antecedents that shape eco-tourism attitudes, which subsequently drive intention to visit eco-destinations and willingness to pay a premium. The post hoc qualitative phase pinpoints the reasons for the associations suggested in the quantitative study and

uncovers the boundary conditions that could reinforce or diminish the value–attitude–behavior chain. This design provides explanatory power and contextual depth for understanding decision-making in eco-tourism (Mehrotra et al. 2024).

This study enhances the existing literature on eco-tourism in multiple aspects. Initially, it presents two self-enhancement constructs, tranquility and the urge for achievement, which have not been extensively examined in eco-tourism literature. Although tranquility perception is acknowledged as a significant motivator for eco-destinations, the achievement scale in outdoor recreational activities and tranquility perception has only just been established (Hu et al. 2021; Próchniak 2016). This work is one of the initial efforts to validate and utilize these scales for empirical research. Furthermore, the findings from qualitative research aid practitioners in developing effective tactics through the CRED framework (Credibility, Relaxation, Experience, Distinction) to enhance eco-tourism and elevate the willingness to pay for eco-tourism services.

2 | Literature Review

2.1 | Values and Eco-Destinations

Values act as universal, aspirational end-goals that possess differing levels of importance and serve as guiding principles in an individual's life (Schwartz 1992). Their significance in pro-environmental research stems from their relative stability in comparison to attitudes or beliefs (Schwartz 1992). Thus, incorporating values into research can facilitate the formulation of enduring solutions to promote pro-environmental behavior (Sreen et al. 2018).

Scholars applied Schwartz's theory of personal values to explain eco-tourism attitudes and intentions (Li and Cai 2011; Ahmad et al. 2020; Terzić and Bajrami 2021). Schwartz (1992) identified 10 core values—power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, and security—which further belong to four higher-order value dimensions that exist in oppositional pairs: openness to change (e.g., stimulation and self-direction) versus conservation (e.g., tradition, conformity, and security) and self-transcendence (e.g., universalism and benevolence) versus self-enhancement (e.g., achievement and power). Research suggests that self-transcendence and conservation values positively influence eco-tourism attitudes and intentions (Ahmad et al. 2020).

Building upon Schwartz's value theory, Stern et al. (1995) identified egoistic values (a self-enhancement value) and altruistic and biospheric values (self-transcendence values) as key predictors of pro-environmental behavior. The influence of environmental values has been well-documented in eco-tourism research, with studies demonstrating that altruistic and biospheric values positively influence eco-tourism attitudes and intentions, whereas egoistic values have been found to negatively impact these attitudes (Perkins and Brown 2012; Beall et al. 2020; Chauvat et al. 2023; Shi and Chen 2024).

However, scholars expressed concerns that focusing solely on self-transcendence values (e.g., altruism and biospheric

values) may not fully explain attitudes and intentions toward eco-destinations (Verma et al. 2019). Other studies highlighted motivational factors like relationship-building, self-development, escapism, relaxation, and immersion in nature as key determinants of eco-tourism choices (Pearce and Lee 2005). Despite these insights, most studies exploring the interplay of self-transcendence and self-enhancement values are limited (Proyrungroj 2021). Studying these values together enables a holistic understanding of eco-tourism decision-making, because travelers' choices are rarely guided by a single value but by the interplay of altruistic, biospheric, tranquil, and achievement motivations. Consequently, there remains a critical gap in the literature that integrates self-transcendence and self-enhancement values within a unified theoretical framework to examine their influence on eco-tourism attitudes, intentions, and willingness to pay a premium (WTPP).

2.2 | Value-Attitude-Behavior

According to the value-attitude-behavior (VAB) theoretical framework, values—desired end goals—impact attitudes, which are judgments of behavior—positive or negative—which in turn influence behavior, which guides people's activities (Homer and Kahle 1988). In addition to being used in tourism contexts related to pro-environmental actions, VAB has gained popularity as a theory to quantify pro-environmental behaviors (Shin et al. 2017; Kim et al. 2019; Kim and Hall 2021). For instance, Lee et al. (2021) included the VAB framework to test the influence of education, entertainment, and escapism experiences on functional values. Functional values impact the attitude toward Hanok (traditional Korean houses), impacting the behavioral intention to visit Hanok. In a similar vein, Kim et al. (2019) tested, using VAB, how perceived value affected attitudes toward waste reduction and how social and personal norms about waste reduction affect ecologically friendly eating behavior. Hasan et al. (2021) applied VAB to examine the influence of destination image, perceived value, perceived risks, and satisfaction on intention to visit coastal areas through attitude toward visiting coastal regions. These findings demonstrate the VAB framework's relevance to both tourism and environmentally conscious behavior, although more research is still needed on VAB's application to eco-tourism. The following section develops hypotheses for each of these linkages.

3 | Hypothesis Development

3.1 | Biospheric Values

Biospheric values inform concern regarding nature and animal species (De Groot and Steg 2007). This concern raises individuals' awareness and consciousness regarding the actions that might harm the environment and species inhabiting the earth (Helm et al. 2018; Tiwari 2022). Individuals with biospheric values choose destinations with sustainable practices, such as green hotels (Kamboj et al. 2022; Ferreira et al. 2023), as they positively influence the environment. Vinzenz et al. (2019) found that consumers with self-transcendence concerns, like biospheric values, are persuaded by messages that highlight the sustainability performance of the hotel.

Individuals with biospheric values will likely want to be close to nature and support pro-environmental actions of businesses even when inconvenient (Nguyen et al. 2016). Eco-destinations allow individuals to be close to nature and perform various sustainable activities. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. *Biospheric values have a positive influence on attitude toward eco-tourism.*

3.2 | Altruistic Values

Altruism focuses on the benefit to others rather than self-interest (De Groot and Steg 2007). Studies on tourism have shown that individuals with altruistic values tend to choose pro-social and pro-environmental destinations. For instance, altruism is crucial for volunteer tourism (Meng et al. 2020) and intention to visit green hotels (Rahman and Reynolds 2017). Studies on eco-tourism also showcase that altruism is a crucial antecedent (Beall et al. 2020). Eco-tourism helps local communities thrive by generating employment opportunities for the local community (Shasha et al. 2020). Various eco-tourism destinations include local individuals in activities and help increase their well-being. Individuals with altruism support businesses taking action to alleviate problems of inequality, income gap, and discrimination. Hence, we argue for the following hypothesis:

H2. *Altruism has a positive influence on attitude toward eco-tourism.*

3.3 | Tranquility

A place provides the value of tranquility by focusing on the environmental quality of its surroundings and helping achieve a spiritual state of inner peace (Hu et al. 2020; Kim 2013). Tranquility has gained interest from tourism scholars, who examine perceptions, experiences, and motivations of tranquility (Hu et al. 2020). Despite the relevance of tranquility in tourism, studies examining the influence of tranquility perceptions on destination evaluations still need to be included (Hu et al. 2020).

Scholars identified that tranquil areas have vegetation, water bodies, and clear skies (Hewlett et al. 2017; Wartmann and Mackaness 2020). Furthermore, Hu et al. (2020) developed a scale to measure tranquility perception that consisted of nature, culture, disturbance, relaxation, and coherence. Scholars have found that eco-destinations provide natural relaxation, quietness, and connection with nature. Khan (2003, 111) highlighted that eco-tourism helps know about other cultures and helps these cultures economically. The findings of these studies suggest that individuals might perceive eco-destinations as tranquil. Hence, the experience of wildlife, clear skies, crystal transparent water streams, the sound of nature, and cultural aesthetics might make individuals experience tranquility in eco-destinations (Votsi et al. 2014). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3. *Tranquility has a positive influence on attitude toward eco-tourism.*

3.4 | Need for Achievement

The concept of “need for achievement” emphasizes the intrinsic motivation to pursue excellence, uphold elevated standards, and attain mastery of abilities (McClelland and Liberman 1949). Eco-tourism places are distinguished for providing a variety of outdoor leisure activities, including fishing, biking, scuba diving, and safaris, which allow individuals to test their limits and engage with others. Research by Chi and Pham (2024) highlights the crucial influence of excitement on eco-tourism intentions, mostly through participation in outdoor activities. Likewise, researchers found that tourists in eco-destinations see outdoor activities, such as cow milking and safari trips, as exhilarating, which affects their intentions to return to these locations. Chiu et al. (2013) indicated that excitement significantly influences the intention to visit eco-destinations. Participating in outdoor recreational activities generates enthusiasm as individuals seek to satisfy their need for accomplishment through engagement and competition. Consequently, those who view eco-locations as satisfying their accomplishment needs are likely to develop favorable assessments of eco-tourism destinations. Therefore, we put forth the subsequent hypothesis:

H4. *Need for achievement has a positive influence on attitude toward eco-tourism.*

3.5 | Eco-Tourism Attitude

According to the TPB, attitude is a mix of evaluative views regarding the consequences of behavior and the weight given to each outcome (Ajzen 1991). Researchers criticize the measurement of attitude in TPB for its overrationality. To address this, several scholars suggest that attitudes have both cognitive and emotional/affective aspects (Hultman et al. 2015). This study utilizes the affective aspects of attitude, as these components have been shown in previous literature to effectively influence eco-tourism intentions (Hultman et al. 2015).

Attitude is the most reliable indicator of intentions in various pro-environmental contexts (Chatterjee et al. 2021). Verma et al. (2019) found that attitudes influence intentions to visit green hotels. Using behavioral reasoning theory, Chatterjee et al. (2021) discovered that attitudes about eco-friendly items affect intentions to buy eco-friendly products. Research focusing on eco-tourism has also revealed a strong correlation between attitude toward eco-tourism and plans to engage in it (Hultman et al. 2015; Wang et al. 2023). Consequently, we propose the following hypothesis:

H5. *Attitude toward eco-tourism has a positive influence on eco-tourism intention.*

Previous research demonstrates inconsistent findings regarding the impact of attitude on WTPP. While some scholars indicate that consumers are willing to pay extra for sustainability initiatives taken by hotels (Casado-Díaz et al. 2020), others suggest that consumers are not willing to pay more for such initiatives (Manaktola and Jauhari 2007). Customers may not be willing to pay more for green initiatives in hotels because they might believe these initiatives will save money for hotels in the long run

and that hotels should cover the associated costs. Additionally, they may feel that these initiatives would make their stay less convenient.

We concur with research demonstrating the impact of pro-environmental attitudes on WTPP. According to Casado-Díaz et al. (2020), awareness of water problems and attitudes toward water conservation are determinants of WTPP for water-saving activities. Of the 681 tourists surveyed, 44.30% said they would be willing to pay more for water-saving measures. Similarly, Kang et al. (2012) demonstrated a favorable correlation between WTPP for hotels' green initiatives and a pro-environmental mindset, as determined by the new environmental paradigm. Therefore, we contend that people with a favorable attitude toward eco-tourism sites would have a positive view of them and be willing to pay more for them. This reasoning aligns with the research conducted by Hultman et al. (2015), which demonstrated a favorable correlation between WTPP and an emotive component of eco-tourism attitude.

H6. *Attitude toward eco-tourism has a positive influence on WTPP.*

3.6 | Intention to Visit Eco-Tourism Destination

WTPP refers to the desire to pay more for specific items (Ajzen and Driver 1991). Ajzen and Driver (1991) used willingness to pay for public goods as a proxy for intention and found that the TPB variables—attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control—predicted this willingness. Therefore, the intention to visit an eco-destination and WTPP are both closely associated intentions.

Previous researchers have shown that intentions influence WTPP for green initiatives (Hinnen et al. 2015). For instance, TPB constructs positively correlate with the willingness to pay for green-freight transportation t-shirts and favorably influence the intention to purchase such t-shirts (Schniederjans and Starkey 2014). In the context of ecotourism, Hultman et al. (2015) discovered a significant correlation between intention and WTPP. People who enjoy eco-destinations and intend to visit them are more likely to be prepared to pay for such experiences. Thus, the intention to visit eco-destinations is positively linked to WTPP for ecotourism. Consequently, the following supposition is proposed:

H7. *Eco-tourism intention has a positive influence on WTPP.*

Figure 1 showcases the theoretical framework.

4 | Methodology

4.1 | Study 1: Measures

Each construct comprised several items derived from previously validated scales. The survey had 11 primary constructs: biospheric values, altruistic values, need for achievement, nature, culture, relaxation, disturbance, cohesiveness, attitude toward ecotourism, intention to visit eco-destination, and WTPP. The

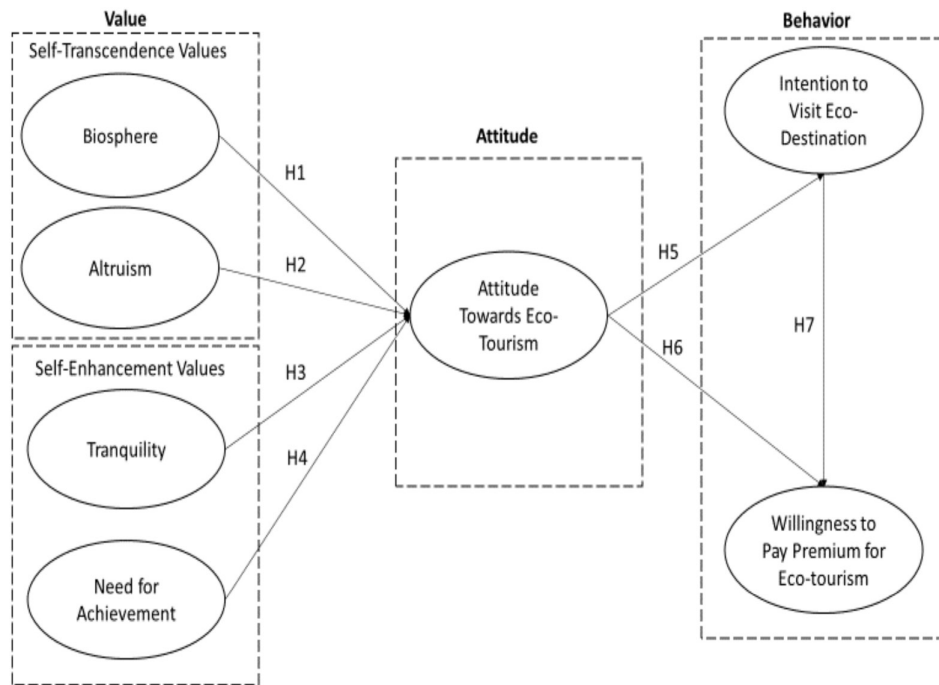


FIGURE 1 | Theoretical framework (authors own).

items were assessed with a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from “1” = *strongly agree* to “7” = *strongly disagree*. The altruistic values consisted of six items derived from Steg et al. (2005). The biospheric values consisted of six components derived from Shin et al. (2017). Tranquility is a second-order construct including five first-order constructs: nature (three items), relaxation (four items), cohesiveness (three items), disturbance (four things), and culture (four items), as derived from Hu et al. (2021). The need for achievement comprised 10 components derived from Próchniak (2016). The ecotourism attitude, comprising four factors, and the intention to visit an ecotourism destination, consisting of three items, were derived from Lam and Hsu (2006). The desire to pay more comprised six measures derived from Lu et al. (2014). Furthermore, we incorporated inquiries regarding the socio-demographic attributes of the participants, including age, gender, family income, household size, and educational attainment.

4.2 | Data Collection

The initial survey was sent to academic experts working on tourism and one practitioner working in the ecotourism area. The experts suggested a few modifications in the language of the implemented items. Next, a pilot study comprised 30 respondents from the target population. The pilot study allowed us to check for any technical language issues in the questionnaire, the length of the questionnaire not resulting in fatigue, and the interpretation of the meanings of each item. Feedback received from the respondents was noted, and changes were made to the questionnaire. This step helped improve the questionnaire's readability for the target population.

The survey comprised three sections. Section 1 presented questions related to the four values. Section 2 consisted of ecotourism

attitudes, intentions, and WTPPs. Finally, Section 3 asked questions related to socio-demographics. The survey-based data collection process faces the following three key limitations: (1) ensuring the sample is representative of the target population; (2) securing an adequate number of data points to achieve sufficient statistical power; and (3) effectively operationalizing variables to align with the study's objectives.

Crowd-sourcing platforms, such as Prolific, address the first two barriers (Russo 2022). Hence, Prolific Academic was used to recruit participants. Furthermore, Prolific Academic has been widely used for data collection because of its user-friendly interface, quick response time, and rigorous recruitment standards (Talwar et al. 2021). However, using crowdsourcing methods, like Prolific, also has certain limitations. A potential challenge of using digital platforms is the risk of nonrepresentation bias, as Prolific relies on convenience sampling. To mitigate this issue and ensure representative sampling, we implemented several measures. First, we calculated the required sample size a priori using 10 constructs, 59 items, an 80% power level, a medium effect size (0.30), and a 95% confidence interval (Soper 2024). The minimum sample size needed to detect the effect was determined to be 190. The total number of eligible responses collected via Prolific was 296, exceeding the minimum requirement. Lastly, we set the demographic distribution of the sample on the digital platform to match the proportional population demographics. This ensured that the sample composition closely aligned with the population distribution across key demographic criteria.

The survey was distributed to individuals who were prolific and living in the USA. The screening criteria were kept as individuals living in the USA and who knew about ecotourism. The screening question asked respondents about an ecotourism location and whether they had visited an eco-destination recently. Only participants who were familiar with ecotourism

TABLE 1 | Respondent profile (authors own).

Demographic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	111	37.50%
Female	183	61.82%
Do not want to disclose	2	0.68%
Education		
High school	64	21.62%
Diploma/undergraduation	126	42.57%
Graduate	38	12.84%
Postgraduation	52	17.57%
PhD	16	5.41%
Marital status		
Divorced	13	4.38%
In relationship	44	14.81%
Married	129	43.43%
Single	110	37.04%

were considered. The average age of the respondents was 36.92 years, closer to the population median age of 28.9 years (US Census Bureau 2023). The average monthly income of the respondents was 11,396.80 USD. Table 1 presents the details regarding other socio-demographic information collected during the survey.

4.3 | Study 2: Post Hoc Qualitative Phase

The post hoc qualitative investigation elucidates the important and nonsignificant associations derived from the quantitative research findings. The explanation encompasses motivations, perspectives, and boundary circumstances that statistical proof of connections may not entirely comprehend (Molina-Azorín and López-Gamero 2014). Consequently, the post hoc qualitative study offers a refined comprehension of eco-tourism ideals and ensures both internal validity and practical consequences for the promotion and management of eco-tourism experiences.

The participants were randomly chosen from the initial pool of respondents. The filtering criteria were implemented based on the frequency of travel to eco-tourism destinations for leisure, both domestically and globally. The selection criteria guaranteed that the participants possessed knowledge of eco-destinations and the wider tourist context, allowing them to offer educated insights on the study's inquiries. The continuity and methodological consistency achieved by selecting participants from the original quantitative pool 5 months after the initial data collection facilitated a comprehensive analysis of the prior findings.

Twenty-five participants provided open-ended responses for the findings of each study. Saturation was theoretically attained by the fifteenth interview; nonetheless, an additional 10 interviews were

conducted to guarantee that no essential insights were overlooked. The mean session duration was 40 min, with individual sessions ranging from 30 to 45 min. Ten examples were removed by excluding individuals who provided inadequate responses or did not pass attention-check questions. The final dataset consisted of 18 interviews, which formed the basis for the theme analysis.

This study employs a realism paradigm, commonly associated with mixed-method research, for which theme analysis is particularly appropriate. Thematic analysis facilitates the identification and examination of meaning patterns within participants' narratives (Bhardwaj et al. 2023). Furthermore, it facilitates the merging of theory-driven (deductive) and data-driven (inductive) ideas, rendering it helpful for research endeavors aimed at enhancing comprehension of previously established correlations (Roopak et al. 2025).

5 | Data Analysis

The data analysis is done using partial least square structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) as the research objective of this study is to explain maximum variance in its endogenous constructs (Hair et al. 2016); tranquility is a higher order construct and PLS-SEM is well-suited for including higher order complex models than CB-SEM (Hair et al. 2016), and PLS-SEM is less strict than CB-SEM over issues of normality (Ali et al. 2017).

The data analysis consists of two steps: assessment of the measurement model and the structural model. SmartPLS 4.0 is the software used for conducting PLS-SEM (Sarstedt et al. 2022).

5.1 | Common Method Bias

Nonresponse bias might occur because of differences in early and late respondents. Prolific assures that it accounts for these differences and removes responses that might cause nonresponse bias (Talwar et al. 2021).

Common-method bias (CMB) might occur as the data was collected using the same method and scale, and all items were measured in one go (Malhotra et al. 2016). We adopted procedural methods to avoid CMB by assuring anonymity to respondents, allowing breaks in between sections to avoid fatigue, and randomizing items to avoid order effects (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Furthermore, Harman's one-factor test was conducted by forming a single unrotated factor that explained 30.90% variance, which is less than the threshold value of 50%. Hence, the data does not suffer from CMB.

5.2 | Measurement Model Assessment

In the initial assessment, all factor loading scores for each construct were above 0.60 and did not lower the average variance extracted (AVE) values below the required threshold. Consequently, no items were removed from the first-order constructs. However, the factor loading for the disturbance (reverse scaled to form quietness) was less than 0.40 on the second-order construct of tranquility, leading to its removal. The composite reliability (CR) scores ranged between 0.834

TABLE 2 | Study measures and factor loadings (authors own).

Constructs	Items	First-order factor loadings	Second-order factor loadings
Biospheric (BIO)	BIO1. I believe it is important to harmonize with other species and nature	0.797	0.797
	BIO2. I prefer to fit into nature rather than control nature	0.788	0.788
	BIO3. I like to protect the environment	0.890	0.890
	BIO4. I anticipate preserving nature	0.876	0.876
	BIO5. I believe in protecting natural resources	0.848	0.848
	BIO6. I consider the balance of nature is delicate and easily upset	0.712	0.712
Altruism (ALT)	ALT1. I think it is important that every person in the world be treated equally	0.745	0.745
	ALT2. I want justice for everyone, even for people I do not know	0.859	0.859
	ALT3. I believe all the everyone should live in harmony	0.787	0.787
	ALT4. Promoting peace among all groups in the world is important to me	0.844	0.844
	ALT5. I want everyone to be treated justly, even people I do not know	0.859	0.859
	ALT6. It is important to me to protect the weak in society	0.782	0.782
Cohesion (COH)	COH1. The natural landscape blends with the ecotourism destination	0.894	0.878
	COH2. The aesthetic features (e.g.,- building, lake, hills, forest) ecotourism destination help understand the particular environment.	0.872	
	COH3. The natural and man-made things in the ecotourism destination are very harmonious	0.819	
Culture (CUL)	CUL1. The ecotourism destination has activities that promote local culture	0.894	0.600
	CUL2. The ecotourism destination contains architecture of buildings that showcase local culture	0.827	
	CUL3. There are ancient temples and buildings in the ecotourism destination	0.620	
	CUL4. The ecotourism destination provides the local cuisine	0.851	
Nature (NAT)	NAT1. The ecotourism destination has a naturally beautiful landscape	0.922	0.869
	NAT2. The ecotourism destination is an appealing destination because of the experience of nature	0.924	
	NAT3. The ecotourism destination provides the look of an unpolluted area	0.877	
Relaxation (REL)	REL1. The view of natural landscape is relaxing	0.740	0.767
	REL2. I feel relax being close to animals and nature	0.869	
	REL3. The wind blows comfortably on me	0.655	
	REL4. I feel relaxed by enjoying activities in nature	0.895	

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

Constructs	Items	First-order factor loadings	Second-order factor loadings
Quietness (QUIET)	QUIET1. Vehicles go back and forth frequently in the ecotourism destinations	0.815	0.338 (Removed)
	QUIET2. Merchants are hawking their goods In the ecotourism destinations	0.816	
	QUIET3. The tour guide is introducing the scenic area in ecotourism destination results in a noisy environment	0.867	
	QUIET4. There are many people in the scenic area in ecotourism destination that cause noise	0.882	
Need for achievement (NOA)	NOA1. In outdoor recreation, I like to take challenges in natural environment I have not yet had the opportunity of going to	0.747	0.747
	NOA2. In outdoor recreation, I like the outdoor recreations which require physical effort	0.783	0.783
	NOA3. In outdoor recreation, I want to have more and more new achievements	0.821	0.821
	NOA4. In outdoor recreation, I prefer more difficult places of wild nature than those that are easily accessible	0.813	0.813
	NOA5. In outdoor recreation, I would like to be a person who was the first to conquer a summit	0.728	0.728
	NOA6. In outdoor recreation, I treat confrontation with a natural element as a battle	0.703	0.703
	NOA7. In outdoor recreation, hard to reach places of wilderness is my passion	0.833	0.833
	NOA8. I like to prove that I am strong and tough in the outdoor recreation	0.813	0.813
	NOA9. I seek a new and ambitious goals in the outdoor recreation	0.848	0.848
	NOA10. In the outdoor recreation, I like the trails that are more difficult than easier routes	0.823	0.823
Eco-tourism attitude (ATT)	ATT1. I enjoy visiting ecotourism destination	0.915	0.915
	ATT2. I feel positive about ecotourism destination	0.921	0.921
	ATT3. I will have fun in ecotourism destination	0.936	0.936
	ATT4. Ecotourism destination is a pleasant experience	0.938	0.938
Intention to visit eco-destination (INT)	INT1. I want to visit an ecotourism destination	0.939	0.939
	INT2. I intend to visit an ecotourism destination within a foreseeable future	0.919	0.919
	INT3. I will visit an ecotourism destination within the next 12 months	0.938	0.938

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

Constructs	Items	First-order factor loadings	Second-order factor loadings
Willingness to pay premium (WTPP)	WTPP1. I am willing to go on a more expensive holiday in order to reduce pollution	0.848	0.848
	WTPP2. I am willing to financially support ecotourism projects	0.844	0.844
	WTPP3. I am willing to pay more for a holiday if I knew the added cost paid for a better environment	0.927	0.927
	WTPP4. I am willing to pay more for a holiday today in exchange for ecotourism experiences in the future	0.909	0.909
	WTPP5. I am willing to pay more for ecotourism as opposed to “regular” tourism.	0.880	0.880

Note: Tranquility is a second-order construct for which latent scores of coherence, nature, relaxation, quietness, and culture act as factor loadings. Quietness is a reverse scale for disturbance and is removed as its factor loading is below 0.40.

TABLE 3 | Reliability and convergent validity (authors own).

	Cronbach alpha	CR (rho_c)	AVE
BIO	0.902	0.925	0.673
ALT	0.898	0.922	0.662
TRA	0.736	0.831	0.517
NOA	0.935	0.944	0.628
ATT	0.946	0.961	0.860
INT	0.924	0.952	0.868
WTPP	0.929	0.944	0.739

and 0.947, which is above the threshold value of 0.70 (Hair et al. 2016). Convergent validity is confirmed as the AVE scores range between 0.628 and 0.838, which is higher than the threshold value of 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Discriminant validity is confirmed by HTMT, as the values for each pair of constructs were below the threshold value of 0.85 (Barclay et al. 1995; Darvishmotevali and Ali 2020). Table 2 reports the measurement items and factor loadings used in the study. Table 3 provides the reliability and convergent validity statistics for the constructs. Table 4 presents the discriminant validity assessment using the HTMT criterion.

5.3 | Structural Model Assessment

We conducted hypotheses testing using bootstrapping with 5000 samples at a 99% confidence interval. The results indicate that the biospheric value ($\beta=0.06$, $p>0.01$) and altruistic value ($\beta=0.02$, $p>0.01$) are not significantly associated with ecotourism attitudes (H1, H2). However, tranquility ($\beta=0.61$, $p<0.01$) and need for achievement ($\beta=0.17$, $p<0.01$) are significantly positively associated with ecotourism attitudes (H3, H4). Ecotourism attitudes also have a significant positive association with the intention to visit ecotourism destinations ($\beta=0.75$, $p<0.01$) and WTPP ($\beta=0.36$, $p<0.01$) (H5, H6). Additionally,

the intention to visit eco-destinations significantly influences the WTPP ($\beta=0.24$, $p<0.01$) (H7).

Although not hypothesized, we also explored specific indirect effects. The results show that ecotourism attitudes positively impact WTPP through the intention to visit eco-destinations ($\beta=0.18$, $p<0.01$). Furthermore, tranquility ($\beta=0.46$, $p<0.01$) and need for achievement influence the intention to visit eco-destinations through ecotourism attitudes ($\beta=0.13$, $p<0.01$).

The R^2 values for the endogenous constructs of ecotourism attitudes, the intention to visit ecotourism destinations, and WTPPs are 52.90%, 55.70%, and 31.60%, respectively.

Table 5 summarizes the hypotheses results.

5.4 | Post Hoc Qualitative Analysis

Eighteen participants provided qualitative data to conduct thematic analysis for discovering the motivation behind eco-tourism destinations. A top-down methodology helped identify and analyze patterns in the data to develop themes (Naeem et al. 2023). Two researchers followed the guidelines for analyzing qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2006). First, open codes were developed through recognition of relevant keywords, phrases, and performing line by line coding. Next, these open codes were grouped together on the basis of similarity to generate themes or axial codes (Goulding 1998). Overall, the analysis produced two themes, namely values that matter and boundary conditions explaining attitude-intention-behavior gap.

Participants varied in terms of age and gender. The average age of respondents was 37.20 years, 53.34% were male, 44.36% were female, and the rest 3.30% preferred not to say. Participants included adults who have taken at least 1 leisure trip in the past 12 months, domestic or international. All participants were familiar with eco-options and have considered, booked, or stayed at an eco-destination.

TABLE 4 | Discriminant validity (HTMT) (authors own).

	ALT	BIO	ATT	INT	NOA	TRA	WTPP
ALT							
BIO	0.487						
ATT	0.243	0.424					
INT	0.160	0.339	0.797				
NOA	0.096	0.316	0.422	0.455			
TRA	0.276	0.555	0.796	0.658	0.416		
WTPP	0.262	0.598	0.568	0.542	0.437	0.599	

TABLE 5 | Hypothesis results (authors own).

Hypotheses	Path	β	p	Support
H1	BIO $\rightarrow$ ATT	0.021	> 0.05	No
H2	ALT $\rightarrow$ ATT	0.066	> 0.05	No
H3	TRA $\rightarrow$ ATT	0.614	< 0.01	Yes
H4	NOA $\rightarrow$ ATT	0.172	< 0.01	Yes
H5	ATT $\rightarrow$ INT	0.746	< 0.01	Yes
H6	ATT $\rightarrow$ WTPP	0.356	< 0.01	Yes
H7	INT $\rightarrow$ WTPP	0.244	< 0.01	Yes

Furthermore, the trustworthiness was ensured through researcher triangulation and member verification. Triangulation allowed researchers to independently code data, compare data with each other, and discuss the interpretations of their coding to minimize individual biases. The member-checking verification was done by sending the identified codes to the member and asking if the interpretation is correct or not (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007). The details regarding the two identified themes are presented below in Figure 2.

The first theme identified is values that matter for eco-tourism destinations. The findings show that not all values matter equally. While past research regularly showcases that environmental or altruistic values align with eco-tourism (Ahmad et al. 2020; Zhang et al. 2023; Mandić et al. 2024), participants with these values felt that eco-tourist destinations have become commercialized, inauthentic, inconvenient, and involved in greenwashing. Participants felt that eco-tourism destinations destroyed culture, displaced local populace, and possess a lack of real community benefit.

“Eco-tourism is capitalism ... it may be disguised as preservation but is incompatible with the natural world.”

(P15, Male, 42)

“Travel is a splurge ... people focus on themselves, not the environment.”

(P13, Female, 26)

Tranquillity emerged as a value that strongly influenced people to think and feel positively about the eco-destination. Participants indicated that eco-destination can provide an escape from urban stress and a way to reconnect with nature through peace, mindfulness, and immersive experiences.

“Eco-lodges ... serene settings—rainforest sounds, sunrise yoga.”

(P6, Female, 34)

“The pace is slower ... more opportunity to be present without feeling overwhelmed.”

(P10, Male, 37)

Similarly, need for achievement emerged as a powerful driver for eco-tourism. Participants saw an eco-destination as a challenge, an opportunity for growth, or a way to gain distinction through exclusive and unique experiences.

“Completing a difficult hike or volunteering in conservation gives a sense of pride.”

(P12, Female, 29)

The second theme emerged from data is boundary conditions in attitude-intention-behavior gap. The quantitative results show that attitude toward eco-tourism positively influence intention and willingness to pay; however, the qualitative data reveals that eco-tourism is often constrained by practical considerations such as cost, convenience, and comfort.

“Logical ... but practical limitations like high expenses can hinder action.”

(P11, Female, 35)

“I’d pay more for clean, peaceful places that truly help nature and local people.”

(P16, Male, 38)

“I’d pay a premium for bundled packages and modern luxuries like reliable internet and A/C.”

(P10, Male, 37)

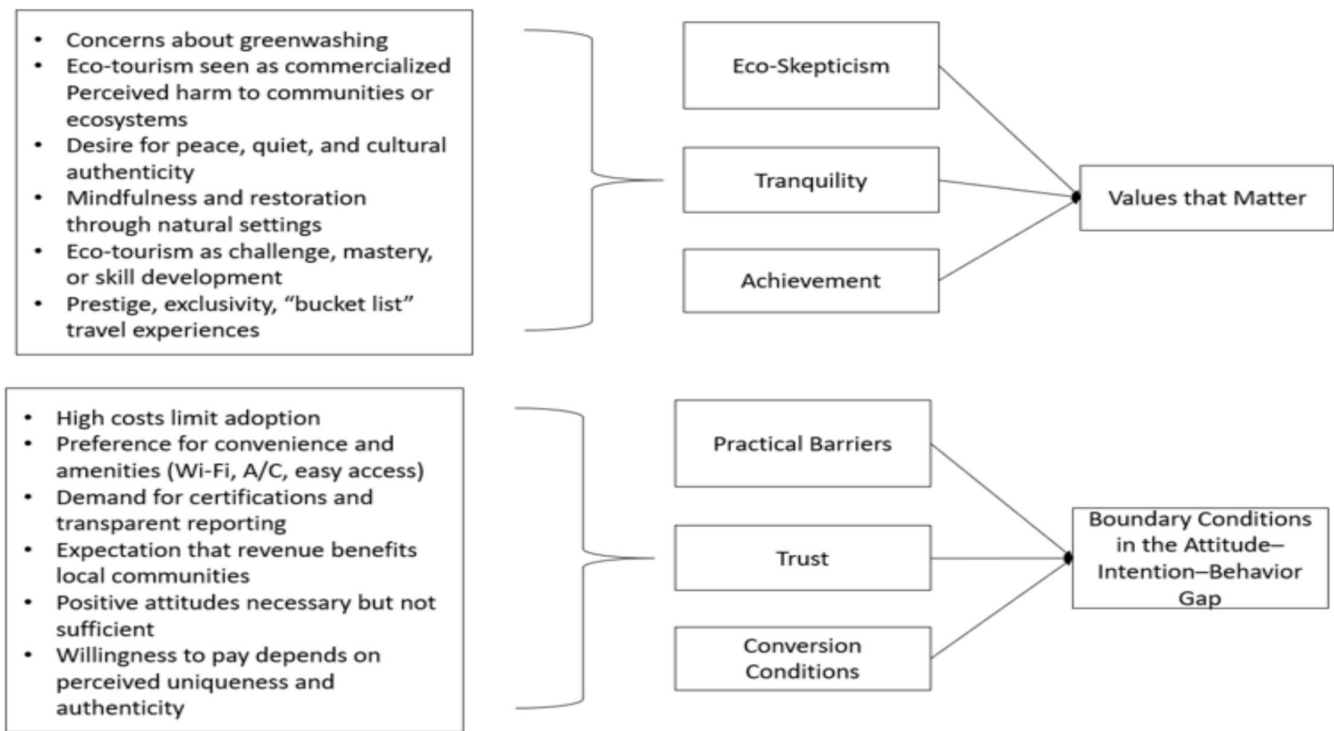


FIGURE 2 | Post hoc qualitative analysis (authors own).

The intention-willingness to pay gap can be fulfilled by providing credibility to the eco-destinations. Participants indicate that authenticity, conservation practices, and contributions to local communities should be kept transparent and eco-certificates should verify such efforts.

“Certifications like EarthCheck help verify these efforts.”

(P6, Female, 34)

“I’d be more willing to pay ... authentic community engagement and transparent reporting.”

(P8, Male, 40)

The theme showcased that the quantitative findings of attitude leading to intention leading to WTPP are not absolute but dependent on financial feasibility, convenience, credibility of sustainability claims, and perceived experiential value.

The thematic insights are used to derive actionable insights for eco-tourism practitioners by designing a CRED model (Credibility, Relaxation, Experience, Distinction) as a practitioner-oriented framework.

Credibility is central to overcoming skepticism showcased by individuals having biospheric and altruistic values. Eco-tourist destinations need to have certifications, present transparent sustainability reporting, and demonstrate community benefits to mitigate perceptions of greenwashing. Employees need to be active in promoting green behaviors through their actions (Chi et al. 2023). Participants report that they showcase a higher WTPP for firms taking such measures.

“If there was some kind of evidence of the positive or at least minimal impact, I think that would help.”
(P14, Male, 34)

“I’d be more willing to pay if I knew the money directly supports locals and conservation.” (P8, Male, 40)

Participants seek relaxation when they visit eco-destinations. Hence, eco-destinations providing tranquility by highlighting peace, authenticity and natural beauty are highly desirable. Eco-destination practitioners should market their resorts by emphasizing on serene landscapes, cultural immersion, and opportunities for mindfulness, rather than focusing only on environmental features.

“I would be more willing to pay a premium if my experience would be free of other people. Nothing ruins tranquility quite like other humans.” (P1, Female, 45)

“I would love experiences that are relaxing, like spas, natural pools, and long strolls through nature to connect with nature and myself.” (P2, Male, 29)

Furthermore, participants indicate that they seek eco-tourism as a stage for challenge and growth. Practitioners need to design activities such as guided treks, reef restoration dives, or wildlife conservation projects allows operators to meet the needs of travelers seeking accomplishment, skill development, or physical challenge.

“There would have to be plenty of activities or really special cultural/natural attractions for me to want to pay a premium for the trip.” (P12, Female, 29)

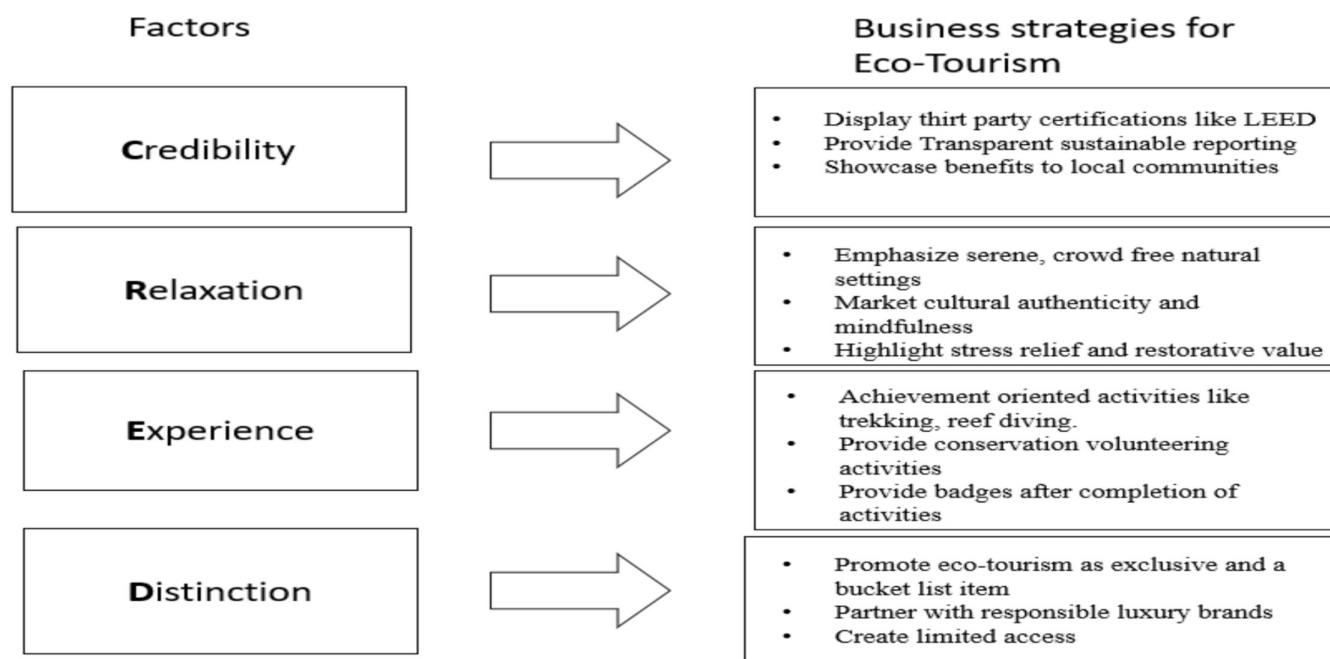


FIGURE 3 | Business strategies for eco-tourism (authors own).

Finally, participants report that they seek status and uniqueness from mass-market tourists. Practitioners can create distinction by providing exclusivity and limited access to emphasize scarcity and privilege, and get involved in prestige story telling by being part of a global movement that support saving untouched landscapes.

“Being able to show off what you’ve earned is probably more rewarding than the site itself.”

(P9, Male, 28)

Figure 3 presents the business strategies suggested according to the CRED framework.

6 | Discussion

Answering RQ1 and RQ2, the findings suggest that altruism and biospheric values do not significantly contribute to the formation of eco-tourism attitudes or indirectly influence intentions to visit eco-tourism destinations and willingness to pay a premium (WTPP) through these attitudes. This contradicts earlier research in the pro-environmental behavior domain, which commonly demonstrates that self-transcendence or environmental values shape attitudes toward pro-environmental behaviors and influence intentions to engage in such behaviors (Lee and Jan 2018; Ashraf et al. 2019; Ahmad et al. 2020; Zhang et al. 2023; Mandić et al. 2024). A plausible explanation for this deviation lies in the inclusion of self-enhancing values, specifically tranquility and the need for achievement, in the study’s theoretical framework. The results reveal that tranquility exerts the most significant influence on eco-tourism attitudes, followed by the need for achievement. Prior research has suggested that eco-friendly behaviors may be motivated by self-serving goals, such as the pursuit of a “warm glow”

(Lv et al. 2023) or social-return (Beall et al. 2020). The current study builds upon this perspective, demonstrating that individuals may form positive attitudes toward eco-tourism destinations not out of a desire to protect the environment or support local communities, but to achieve inner peace through a tranquil environment and a sense of accomplishment derived from engaging in outdoor recreational activities. These findings contribute to the limited body of literature suggesting that self-interested motivations can sometimes outweigh moral or environmental considerations (Beall et al. 2020). The post hoc qualitative study further explains why tranquility and achievement values significantly predicted eco-tourism attitudes, while biospheric and altruistic values did not. In other words, the values that truly matter in eco-tourism are those that deliver personal restoration, growth, and credibility in practice, rather than abstract commitments to altruism or environmental concern. This finding clarifies that eco-tourism is embraced most readily when it satisfies experiential, emotional, and self-enhancing values.

Answering RQ3 and RQ4, the results showcase eco-tourism attitudes to predict intention to visit eco-tourism destinations and WTPP positively. These results align with previous scholars who have found a similar relationship (Hultman et al. 2015). TPB indicates attitude as a significant predictor of intentions (Ajzen 1991). As intention toward eco-tourism destinations and WTPP measures the intentions, the findings that eco-tourism attitude influences these variables align with TPB. The results also found intention toward eco-tourism destinations to positively influence WTPP. The possible explanation for this finding is that when individuals believe that saving the environment benefits them, they become more likely to pay for it (Michaud and Llerena 2010). Past scholars have shown that when individuals think of their health and their children’s future, their WTPP increases (Zaichkowsky 1985). Tourists are more inclined toward ecotourism when they are personally motivated

to experience new things rather than extrinsically motivated purposes (Hultman et al. 2015). As this research has found, eco-tourism benefits an individual by improving one's mental state, increasing knowledge regarding local culture, relaxing, and competing with oneself or others. These benefits to the self can increase WTPP. The post hoc qualitative analysis showed that attitude-intention-willingness to pay link is conditional and weakens when travelers perceive barriers related to cost, comfort, convenience, or credibility. Hence, these qualitative insights provide additional boundary conditions under which attitude predicts intention to visit eco-destination, which influences WTPP.

6.1 | Theoretical Implications

First, pro-environmental scholars usually report an attitude-intention gap (Chatterjee et al. 2021; Sadiq et al. 2022; Tandon et al. 2023). The probable reasons for this gap are focusing on a generalized context and not including variables preceding attitudes (Ahmad et al. 2020). This study focuses explicitly on eco-destinations and applies the VAB framework to include values as a precedent to attitudes and behavior.

Second, previous scholars report that environmental or self-transcendence values predict pro-environmental attitudes and intentions (Ahmad et al. 2020; Zhang et al. 2023). However, recent research challenges this idea by showcasing that individuals usually have selfish motives to behave pro-environmentally. For instance, Beall et al. (2020) found that individuals want to visit eco-destinations for self-promotion over and above the environmental values. This study contributes to the growing body of research that re-examines the role of environmental values in explaining eco-tourism attitudes and intentions (Beall et al. 2020), suggesting that incorporating self-focused motivations, such as tranquility and the need for achievement, may diminish the significance of environmental values.

Lastly, this study is the first to adopt the second-order construct of tranquility perception (Hu et al. 2020), which consists of nature, coherence, culture, and relaxation, to measure eco-tourism attitudes and intentions. Furthermore, scholars have ignored the influence of the need for achievement in outdoor recreational activities in eco-destinations on tourists' attitudes and intentions. Hence, this study becomes a pioneer in examining these relationships and developing a comprehensive VAB framework, including self-transcendence and self-enhancement values.

6.2 | Managerial Implications

The qualitative study identified factors including credibility, relaxation, experience, and distinction. Furthermore, the study proposes a set of business strategies organized under the CRED framework, as illustrated in Figure 3. In addition to these strategic recommendations, the study offers several marketing implications derived from quantitative research findings. These implications provide further guidance for practitioners by aligning strategic interventions with empirically supported insights.

These results present significant implications to eco-tourism managers, operators, and destination marketing and management organizations (DMOs) for increasing the inclination to visit eco-destinations and WTPP for eco-tourism services. Eco-destination managers, operators, and DMOs must understand that their promotional strategies might need to vary from focusing on environmental and other benefits to providing inner peace and the need for achievement. The emergence of a unique market niche signifies a noteworthy shift as a significant number of consumers are actively seeking eco products and services and are willing to pay a premium for such services that align with their values.

The tranquil experience can be provided by focusing on a natural landscape, promoting local culture, building architecture in coherence with the natural landscape, and a relaxing environment (Hu et al. 2020). Scholars have shown that the involvement of local residents in eco-tourism helps develop sustainable eco-destinations (D'Souza et al. 2019). Including locals in planning the architecture, conducting sessions on local knowledge, and helping know the symbiotic relationships between locals and nature is beneficial in developing a tranquil environment. Furthermore, the need for achievement can be enhanced by adding outdoor recreational activities that generate excitement by competing and winning in these activities (Chi and Pham 2024). However, outdoor recreational activities might harm the natural landscapes if done excessively. Therefore, managers should be aware of the times and number of outdoor recreational activities they should allow so as not to destroy the tranquil environment.

Finally, the results found that attitude's affective component influences the intention to visit eco-tourism destinations and WTPP. This finding showcases the significance of emotions in influencing intentions and WTPP. Managers might utilize social media and its website to generate pleasant emotions of joy and fun by showcasing visitors' testimonies regarding their feelings when they visit eco-tourism destinations. The potential visitors watching these testimonies might form positive eco-tourism attitudes and potentially increase eco-tourism footfall.

7 | Limitations and Future Research

This research is the first to include environmental values, tranquility, and the need for achievement in a single comprehensive framework to measure intention to visit eco-tourism destinations and WTPP for eco-tourism through eco-tourism attitudes. This section presents limitations in the current research and the future research areas that future scholars can explore.

First, this study omits specific values that might influence attitudes, intentions, and WTPP for eco-tourism. Green consumption values convey eco-friendly purchase behavior and can be applied to examine eco-tourism behaviors (Chatterjee et al. 2021). Furthermore, cultural values have been found to influence pro-environmental attitudes and intentions. However, scholars have yet to explore the influence of cultural values in eco-tourism research (Sreen et al. 2018).

Second, the influence of environmental and self-enhancing values might vary across different socio-demographic segments

(Park et al. 2011). For instance, socialization theory argues that women are socialized to be caring, and men are socialized to become breadwinners for the family. The socialization process makes women care more about the children's future and the environment than men (Sreen et al. 2018). Hence, future scholars can use gender as a moderator and test its influence on the relationship between values and eco-tourism attitudes.

Third, in individualistic cultures, such as the United States, self-enhancing values may hold greater sway, whereas in collectivistic cultures like India, individuals may be more motivated by self-transcendence values. Future research could explore the applicability of the current model across diverse cultural contexts to provide a more nuanced understanding.

Lastly, choice experiments could offer a deeper understanding of how individuals navigate conflicting values. Future research could leverage such methods to build on our findings and explore the influence of value trade-offs in more depth.

Author Contributions

Yuemeng Ge: conceptualization, investigation, methodology, validation, writing – original draft. **Zhi Li:** conceptualization, investigation, data curation, formal analysis, validation, writing – original draft. **Naman Sreen:** conceptualization, investigation, methodology, data curation, formal analysis, writing – original draft. **Rsha Alghafes:** methodology, validation, supervision, project administration, writing – original draft. **Mai Nguyen:** methodology, validation, project administration, writing – original draft.

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