

THESIS SYNOPSIS

Sára Hegedüs

**The role of social norms
in destination and travel mode choice
in relation to environmental awareness**

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Department of Tourism

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1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

1.1. Problem statement

The relationship between tourism and sustainability remains a subject of vibrant debate within the academic literature. Some scholars posit that steering tourism towards a more sustainable trajectory is feasible through the active and responsible engagement of industry stakeholders (Barr et al., 2010). Conversely, advocates of the degrowth paradigm contend that a fundamental transformation of the current socio-economic system is imperative (Haergraves, 2011; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). Adopting the former perspective, which conceptualizes sustainability as a normative orientation, this dissertation investigates environmentally conscious consumer behaviour, a topic that has captivated researchers for decades. Initial theoretical frameworks underscored the significance of knowledge and attitudes in shaping environmentally conscious behaviour, while subsequent models have highlighted rational and normative elements, particularly those aligned with self-interest (Hegedüs et al., 2023). More recent studies have shifted their focus to the influence of context, routines, social practices, and social norms on environmentally conscious behaviour.

The primary objective of this research is to examine the impact of social norms on destination and transportation mode choices within the context of environmental consciousness.

1.2. The focused areas of consumer behaviour: destination and transport mode selection

Consumer behaviour, encompassing the processes by which individuals purchase, consume, and utilize products and services, is shaped by a confluence of cultural, social, personal, and psychological factors, each situated within a

specific contextual framework (Hofmeister-Tóth, 2017). In the examination of sustainable or environmentally conscious consumer behaviour, it is crucial to distinguish whether the primary focus is on the actor's intentionality or the environmentally significant impact of their actions. Empirical research indicates that behaviour driven by environmental consciousness does not inherently result in a diminished negative environmental impact. Conversely, decisions made without explicit consideration of environmental consequences can occasionally lead to positive environmental outcomes (Gatersleben et al., 2002; Csutora, 2012).

In my dissertation, I adopt the definition of environmentally conscious behaviour as intentional behaviour, as articulated by Chiu et al. (2014). Within this framework, particular attention is directed towards decisions that, according to extant literature, substantially contribute to the detrimental environmental impacts of tourism, as posited by Steg and Vlek (2009).

The examination of the environmental impacts of tourism on the natural environment presents a highly complex issue. This analysis can be approached from several angles: on a global scale, in relation to specific destinations, by industry sectors, or from the perspective of the tourist. Moreover, consumer decision-making scenarios are inherently multifaceted, encompassing various types and magnitudes of potential environmental impacts (Jancsik et al., 2019).

Among the environmental impacts of tourism, transportation, particularly air travel, constitutes the most significant factor (Lenzen et al., 2018). This issue has been underscored by the external social movement "flygskam" or "flight shame" which emerged in 2018 in Sweden. Researchers have noted that such phenomena influence social norms (Gössling et al., 2020), contributing to a particularly vibrant discourse on transportation mode choices in recent years.

Destination choice, in conjunction with transportation, also represents a crucial area of analysis. Transportation modes can be selected for specific

destinations, and travel destinations themselves can be chosen based on environmentally conscious criteria. The distance to travel destinations has gained prominence not only from an environmental perspective but also due to safety concerns arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Although intentionality remains the primary consideration, I contend that destination and transportation mode choices are relevant areas of consumer behaviour due to their significant environmental impacts.

1.3. The role of social norms among factors influencing environmentally conscious tourist consumer behaviour

Norms have been conceptualized in various forms within early models of behaviour. Personal (or moral) norms function as internal motivators, guiding individuals to judge behaviours as right or wrong (Schwartz, 1977). Social norms, on the other hand, represent the collective beliefs of a community or society regarding appropriate behaviour, often associated with non-legal sanctions or rewards (Thøgersen, 2009). Subjective or perceived social norms refer to an individual's perception of the expectations held by their community. Adherence to social norms can be driven by a desire to conform (Ajzen, 1991) or because these norms serve as accessible sources of information (Bamberg et al., 2007).

Building on the latter concept, social norms are intricately linked to knowledge, particularly when acknowledging that various dimensions of knowledge significantly influence attitudes and behaviour. This knowledge can be categorized into basic system knowledge, strategic knowledge – such as knowledge related to action strategies – and efficacy knowledge regarding specific impacts (Frick et al., 2004; Abdullah et al., 2020). Notably, strategic and efficacy knowledge are most closely associated with social norms, highlighting the interplay between knowledge and normative influences on behaviour.

Since the inception of early theories, attitudes have remained virtually indispensable elements within these theoretical frameworks. Attitudes can pertain to behaviour within a specific context or more broadly, such as in the choice between domestic versus international travel destinations (Passafaro, 2020).

Social norms are also intrinsically linked to recently emphasized routines and social practices (Yao et al., 2024). Certain social norms can shape social practices, which are particularly evident in tourism, for instance, the perception of air travel as an essential means of international travel.

The role of social norms in general environmentally conscious consumer behaviour has been the subject of relatively few studies (Liu et al., 2021; Melnyk et al., 2022). Within the tourism context, research has specifically investigated the impact of artificially created social norm messages on consumer behaviour.

Research on environmentally conscious consumer behaviour has extensively examined air travel (Mkono & Hughes, 2020), including the impact of the flight shame movement on social norms (Gössling et al., 2020). However, the role of destination choice in the context of environmentally conscious tourism behaviour has received less attention.

Moreover, studies on environmentally conscious consumer behaviour have predominantly adopted a monocultural perspective (Chwialkowska et al., 2020). Consequently, there is a pressing need for further investigation into social norms within this domain. Given the exploratory nature of such inquiries, a qualitative approach is particularly warranted (Liu et al., 2021).

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

The objective of this research is to investigate the influence of social norms on destination and transportation mode choices in the context of environmental consciousness.

This research was conducted in Sweden and Hungary, focusing on four distinct segments, which are:

- Hungarians residing in Hungary since birth,
- Hungarians who grew up in Hungary but have been residing in Sweden for at least three years,
- Swedes who have lived in Sweden since birth,
- Swedes who were born in Sweden but have been residing in Hungary for at least three years.

Through the subgroups of the sample assembled in this way, I can gain a deeper understanding of how the different norms of each society impact environmentally conscious tourist consumer behaviour, which I have conceptualized in my research as the choice of domestic destinations (versus international) and the selection of transportation modes. To answer my research question, I will explore the following sub-questions:

- Q1. How do everyday environmentally conscious behaviour patterns of consumers develop within the examined groups?
- Q2. What actions do members of the examined groups associate with environmentally conscious tourist consumer behaviour?
- Q3. How do travel decisions – particularly concerning the choice between domestic and international destinations and the selection of transportation modes – develop in relation to environmental consciousness within the examined groups?

- Q4. How do respondents perceive the social groups – both from their immediate environment and from the society of one or both countries in which they live or from which they originate – in terms of environmental consciousness?
- Q5. How has environmental consciousness evolved in terms of attitudes and behaviour for individuals who have changed countries, particularly concerning both everyday and leisure travel practices?

To explore individual motivations, attitudes, decision-making drivers, opinion formation dynamics, and interaction processes, qualitative research methods are essential (Mitev, 2019).

For data collection, I employed semi-structured in-depth interviews, which enable participants to freely share their experiences and motivations. Pre-determined topics – and sometimes their sequence – were used to facilitate the collection of data necessary to answer the research questions (Barrick, 2020).

Considering that environmental protection is a subject where respondents may feel inclined to conform to perceived social norms (Gyulavári et al., 2014), I initially presented the research topic as the impact of social norms on travel habits when inviting participants. During the first part of the interview, I focused solely on questions related to their travel experiences to elicit more genuine responses.

A total of 54 in-depth interviews across the four segments constituted the sample, which I analysed using thematic analysis with an inductive approach, facilitated by Nvivo software. Thematic analysis, a flexible qualitative method applicable to a wide range of research areas, offers the advantage of not only analysing directly perceptible processes and superficial meanings but also uncovering and interpreting deeper structures and layers of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the analysis, I assigned emergent codes to the texts, subsequently developing thematic categories, which resulted in a multi-level

code structure. This rigorous analytical process enabled a comprehensive exploration of the data, allowing for the effective addressing of the research sub-questions.

3. THE SCIENTIFIC RESULTS OF THE DISSERTATION

3.1. Answers to the research questions

Based on the results, I have formulated the following answers to the research questions:

Q1. How do consumers' everyday environmentally conscious behaviour patterns develop in the examined groups?

Consumer patterns of everyday environmentally conscious behaviour exhibit notable differences between Sweden and Hungary. Research indicates that respondents residing in Sweden, which generally demonstrates stronger environmental attitudes (EC, 2020), perceive waste sorting as a robust social norm. This perception is prevalent among both Swedish residents and Hungarians living in Sweden. This norm, bolstered by the infrastructural context, has evolved into a social practice (Hargreaves, 2011; Bargeman & Richards, 2020).

However, it appears that Swedes living in Hungary have internalised this norm prior to their relocation, as they maintain their waste sorting behaviour in Hungary, provided the infrastructure does not impose significant barriers. An intriguing new pattern has emerged: Swedes residing in Sweden often no longer consider selective waste collection as an environmentally conscious activity. This shift suggests that the social norm of waste sorting has transitioned into a routine social practice (Jackson, 2005), facilitated by the infrastructural context (Steg & Vlek, 2009), and is characterized by the absence of voluntary commitment.

Q2. What content do the members of the examined groups associate with environmentally conscious tourism consumer behaviour?

The respondents in this study exhibit a more comprehensive understanding of the environmental impacts of tourism than previously indicated in the literature (Bernini, Emili, & Vici, 2021; Booking, 2024). The findings demonstrate that across all segments, respondents predominantly associate environmental consciousness in tourism with the selection of transportation modes. Notably, this association is more pronounced in the three segments related to Sweden (Hungarians and Swedes living in Sweden, Swedes living in Hungary), with other types of practices receiving less attention.

This trend is likely influenced by the societal impact of the flight shame movement on social norms (Gössling et al., 2020), particularly through its informational function (Bamberg et al., 2007). Despite this, there is significant opposition to the movement, especially among the segments connected to Sweden, specifically among the two Swedish nationality groups. This opposition may stem from the "prohibitive" nature of the movement's message and the absence of alternative suggestions, such as specific action strategies (Hargreaves, 2011; Frick et al., 2004; Abdullah et al., 2020). Furthermore, given the strong motivation to travel, individuals may alter their attitudes rather than their behaviour in certain instances (Nikolić et al., 2021).

Choosing domestic destinations almost never emerged as a potential environmentally conscious decision among the respondents.

Q3. How do travel decisions—particularly those related to the choice of foreign/domestic destinations and modes of transportation—develop in terms of environmental consciousness among the examined groups?

The literature's assertion that respondents exhibit greater commitment to everyday environmentally conscious actions than to those related to travel has been corroborated, and this is also reflected in their behaviour (Barr et al., 2010; Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014). However, a somewhat contradictory pattern was observed among Hungarian respondents residing in Hungary. These respondents

assert that they maintain the same environmental considerations when travelling as in their daily lives, such as water conservation and zero-waste shopping. This finding is consistent with the observation that this segment places less emphasis on the notion that transportation constitutes the most significant environmental impact in the context of travel.

When considering intentionality, it is evident that respondents do not factor in environmental considerations when selecting travel destinations. None of the respondents indicated that their choice of a domestic or nearby destination was motivated by a desire to make an environmentally conscious decision. The first significant finding is that the difference in the perception of domestic travel does not vary between residents of the two countries. According to statistics (EC 2024), although Swedes travel abroad much more frequently than Hungarians, the number of domestic trips is also significantly higher in Sweden. However, this data from 2022 reflects a period of more cautious consumer behaviour due to the pandemic. Interviews conducted in 2023-24, however, revealed a different pattern. Among Hungarian respondents living in Hungary, there exists a perceived social norm that domestic travel is a positive and desirable activity, and it is important for individuals to become familiar with their own environment. This sentiment, however, is not linked to environmental consciousness. Within this segment, it is common for individuals to travel frequently and willingly within the country, with some exclusively or predominantly engaging in domestic travel. Some Hungarians residing in Sweden have also internalized this norm and feel it is important to explore the landscapes of their new homeland. However, while nearly all Hungarian respondents living in Hungary engage in domestic travel, Hungarians in Sweden tend to favour international trips, with some not travelling within Sweden for leisure at all. Certain respondents believe they had picked up the Swedish practice of frequent international travel. Swedes living in Hungary reported that

after moving there, they explored Hungary, and a number of them still enjoy domestic adventures. Nonetheless, they generally travel more to international destinations. Swedish respondents living in Sweden are the least likely to travel domestically. Although Swedes enjoy spending time in nature or meeting friends there – a social norm or practice perceived by Hungarians living in Sweden – few Swedish respondents reported taking full-day or multi-day domestic trips. In this segment, the importance of getting to know one's immediate surroundings was not emphasized.

Q4. How do respondents perceive the social groups (their immediate environment and the society of one or both countries) in which they live or from which they originate in terms of environmental consciousness?

Respondents residing in Sweden perceive their acquaintances as more environmentally conscious, though opinions within these segments exhibited greater polarization. A critical finding for this study is the observation noted by a few Hungarians and Swedes living in Sweden, who reported that some of their acquaintances prioritize environmental protection to such an extent that they select transportation modes for leisure travel based on environmental considerations or abstain from traveling altogether. This behaviour was not characteristic of the groups in Hungary.

I conducted an inquiry into all relevant segments regarding the environmental consciousness of societies (about Hungary: Hungarians and Swedes living in Hungary, Hungarians residing in Sweden; about Sweden: Swedes and Hungarians living in Sweden and Swedes residing in Hungary). The respondents' perspectives align with secondary data, suggesting that Swedish society exhibits more environmentally conscious attitudes (EC 2020). The respondents consistently expressed the opinion that Swedish society is more environmentally conscious or more so than other nations. Conversely,

Hungarians are generally viewed as less environmentally conscious, although some progress in this field has been acknowledged.

A notable observation among respondents in all three groups connected to Sweden is the perception that both the high level of consumption and frequent travel in Swedish society hinder its full environmental consciousness. This high consumption level in Sweden is corroborated by data on travel frequency (EC 2024). Furthermore, many respondents within the Swedish segments, both in Hungary and Sweden, reported that environmental consciousness is more evident in attitudes than actual behaviour.

It is essential to highlight that, as established in the discussion on everyday environmental consciousness, the concept of environmental consciousness varies somewhat between the two countries. The literature reviewed does not extensively address the phenomenon where environmentally conscious behaviour, once it becomes easy to implement and a social practice, is less frequently categorized by consumers as environmentally conscious behaviour. However, my findings indicate that this pattern is present among the respondents.

Q5. How has environmental consciousness changed for individuals who have relocated to a different country in terms of attitudes and behaviour, specifically in their everyday practices and leisure travel activities?

In their everyday environmentally conscious practices, respondents in their new countries adhere to stronger social norms related to environmental consciousness. According to multiple accounts, Hungarians residing in Sweden have become more environmentally conscious in their daily practices post-relocation. Conversely, Swedes living in Hungary only tend to forget environmentally conscious practices when infrastructural barriers are strongly present. This suggests that social norms, particularly those concerning waste sorting – identified as the most robust social norm among all environmentally

conscious practices in both countries – have been internalized and transformed into personal norms (Thøgersen, 2009) among Swedish migrants in Hungary, thereby influencing their attitudes and behaviours.

Additionally, the prioritisation of domestic travel and exploring the local environment has emerged as a common norm among Hungarian respondents residing in Hungary. This norm, albeit to a lesser extent, was also observed among several Hungarian respondents living in Sweden, but not among Swedish respondents living in Sweden.

The social norm of avoiding flying, while not significantly impacting behaviour, did influence attitudes among Hungarians residing in Sweden. Their reports indicated a pattern in subjective social norms, reflecting an expectation within Swedish society to reduce or avoid air travel. However, it appears that this norm is not sufficiently strong in Sweden to exert a substantial influence on the behaviour of either the Swedish residents or the Hungarian residents living there.

In conclusion, the primary research question reveals that the general norm of environmental consciousness prevalent in Sweden does not influence the tourism-related behavioural practices of the interviewees. Nevertheless, the findings indicate the emergence of a social norm in Sweden concerning the choice of transportation modes, which deems the avoidance of air travel as desirable. This norm frequently impacts the attitudes of respondents residing in or originating from Sweden, though not uniformly. Instances of behavioural change are relatively rare. Furthermore, there is no discernible social norm concerning the environmental considerations of destination choices, and environmental factors do not play a role in the decision-making process for leisure travel destinations across any segment.

3.2. The scientific contribution of the research

The scientific contribution of the research, based on the qualitative study concerning the sample, is the following:

- Social norms concerning the choice of transportation modes impact attitudes, yet they influence behaviour in only a limited number of individuals. This phenomenon is likely attributable to the flight shame movement, which has strengthened the social norm of avoiding air travel in Sweden. While the informational function of these social norms is evident, they fail to provide strategic knowledge, leaving individuals unaware of alternative options or the effective practices employed by others. Moreover, the intrinsic motivation to travel remains robust in both countries.
- In the context of destination choice, no discernible social norm pertaining to environmental consciousness is evident in either country. However, among Hungarian respondents residing in Hungary, there exists a social norm related to domestic travel and the desire to explore one's immediate environment. Conversely, in Sweden, frequent international travel seems to have become a social practice, primarily driven by climate-related motivations. According to Hungarians living in Sweden, Swedish social norms encompass a greater respect for nature, with frequent outdoor activities constituting a social practice among Swedes.
- In the context of everyday environmental consciousness, social norms have evolved into social practices and exert a significant influence on behaviour, contingent upon the presence of adequate infrastructure. Conversely, social norms related to travel are currently less robust, lacking the necessary infrastructural support and encountering various

contextual barriers. Consequently, these norms have not transitioned into established social practices.

- Everyday environmentally conscious activities that have emerged as social practices are not fully perceived as environmentally conscious behaviours by many members of the respective society.
- The underlying reasons for the aforementioned observation can be attributed to the non-voluntary nature and the routinisation of these practices. When a behavioural practice does not entail sacrifice, is easy to implement, and is adopted by the majority of society – thereby becoming a social practice – many individuals cease to perceive it as an environmentally conscious behaviour.
- Environmentally conscious attitudes related to travel are presently overshadowed by contextual factors, including infrastructure, cost considerations, and available travel time. Additionally, motivational factors such as the pursuit of novelty further undermine these attitudes.
- The informational role of social norms is crucial for strategic knowledge; however, it is presently effective only in the realm of everyday behaviour. In the context of tourism practices, there is a notable absence of concrete "guidance" regarding expected behaviour. Additionally, any existing guidance encounters significant contextual obstacles.
- Hungarians relocating to Sweden, a society characterized by stronger social norms, endeavour to conform to the social norms of their new homeland, particularly when these norms have evolved into established social practices. Conversely, Swedes transitioning from a society with robust environmental social norms to Hungary, where such norms are comparatively weaker, tend to preserve their previous norms, which have likely been internalised.

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5. PUBLICATIONS ON THE AUTHOR

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5.2. Publications in Hungarian

1. Hegedüs, S. & Kiss, K. (2024): 'A „flight shame” mozgalom ismertsége és megítélése Svédországban és Magyarországon'. In Debrecei, J. & Benke, E. (szerk.): *I. Nemzetközi Látogatógazdaság Konferencia. Helyek, látogatók és együttműködések: Absztraktkötet*. Budapest: Budapesti Gazdasági Egyetem, Látogatógazdaság Kiválósági Központ, p. 45.
2. Hegedüs, S., Kiss, K., & Kovács, E. (2023): 'A környezettudatos fogyasztói magatartás turisztikai aspektusai'. *Turizmus Bulletin*, 23(1), 15–24. <https://doi.org/10.14267/TURBULL.2023v23n1.2>
3. Hegedüs, S., Kiss, K. & Boros, K. (2022): '„Mégis kinek a felelőssége?” – A turizmus szereplőinek fenntarthatósággal kapcsolatos felelőssége a szálláshely-szolgáltatók szemszögéből'. *Comitatus: Önkormányzati szemle*, 39(240), pp. 101–109.
4. Hegedüs, S. (2021): 'Turizmus és fenntarthatóság a járvány után - értelmezések és jövőkép a fiatal fogyasztók körében'. In Szalai, K., Rátz, T. & Michalkó, G. (szerk.): *VIII. Magyar Turizmusföldrajzi Szimpózium 2021: Absztrakt kötet*. Székesfehérvár, Budapest: Kodolányi János Egyetem, Csillagászati és Földtudományi Kutatóközpont Földrajztudományi Intézet, Magyar Földrajzi Társaság, pp. 33–34.
5. Hegedüs, S. & Lontai-Szilágyi, Z. (2019): 'Fenntartható turizmusfejlesztés'. In Irimiás, A., Jászberényi, M., & Michalkó, G. (szerk.): *A turisztikai termékek innovatív fejlesztése*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, pp. 157–170.