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### **THE DOWNSIDE OF PERFORMING ENVIRONMENTALISM: CORE REASONS FOR THE SOCIAL DISCREDITING OF FAKE ECO-TRAVELERS**

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#### **Abstract:**

This article explores the phenomenon of “performative eco-tourism” - the negative consequences of portraying oneself as an environmentalist without genuine commitment - and the core reasons for the social discrediting of “fake” eco-travelers. The study examines the shift from authentic nature conservation to image-building on social media and the subsequent social backlash that occurs when inauthenticity is exposed. The paper identifies key factors leading to the discrediting of such travelers, including moral inconsistency, virtue signaling, and growing audience skepticism. The findings highlight how performative environmentalism can damage a person's reputation and hinder genuine sustainability efforts.

**Keywords:** Fake eco-travelers, performative environmentalism, social discrediting, social media, inauthenticity, sustainable tourism, social criticism.



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### **НЕГАТИВНЫЕ СТОРОНЫ ИМИТАЦИИ ЭКОЛОГИЧЕСКОЙ СОЗНАТЕЛЬНОСТИ: ОСНОВНЫЕ ПРИЧИНЫ ДИСКРЕДИТАЦИИ ФАЛЬШИВЫХ ЭКОТУРИСТОВ**

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#### **Аннотация:**

В данной статье исследуется феномен «демонстративного экотуризма» - негативные последствия имитации экологической сознательности и основные причины дискредитации «фальшивых» экотуристов в глазах общественности. В исследовании рассматривается переход от реальной защиты природы к созданию имиджа в социальных сетях и последующая социальная реакция, возникающая при разоблачении неискренности. В статье выделяются ключевые факторы, ведущие к потере авторитета такими путешественниками, включая моральное несоответствие, «сигнализирование добродетели» и скептицизм аудитории.

**Ключевые слова:** Фальшивые экотуристы, демонстративный экологизм, дискредитация, социальные сети, неискренность, устойчивый туризм, социальная критика.



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### **“O'ZINI TABIATPARVAR KO'RSATISHNING SALBIY TOMONLARI: SOXTA EKOSAYYOHLARNING OBRO'SIZLANISHGA ASOSIY SABABLAR”**

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#### **Anotatsiya:**

Ushbu maqolada “namoyishkorona ekoturizm” fenomeni, ya'ni o'zini tabiatparvar qilib ko'rsatishning salbiy oqibatlari va soxta ekosayyohlarning jamiyat oldida obro'sizlanish sabablari tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqotda insonlarning real tabiatni asrash niyatidan ko'ra, ijtimoiy tarmoqlarda ijobiy imidj yaratishga bo'lgan intilishi va bu soxtalik fosh bo'lganda yuzaga keladigan ijtimoiy nafrat jarayonlari ko'rib chiqiladi. Maqolada soxta ekosayyohlarning obro'sizlanishiga sabab bo'luvchi asosiy omillar sifatida axloqiy nomuvofiqlik, maqtanchoqlik va auditoriyaning skeptik munosabati o'rganiladi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** Soxta ekosayyohlar, namoyishkorona ekologizm, obro'sizlanish, ijtimoiy tarmoqlar, soxtalik, barqaror turizm, ijtimoiy tanqid.

#### **Introduction**

In the modern digital landscape, environmentalism has evolved from a niche activist movement into a powerful form of social capital. As the climate crisis intensifies, “being green” has become a desirable trait that individuals use to



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signal their moral standing and social responsibility. This shift has given rise to a phenomenon known as “performative environmentalism” - a practice where individuals, particularly travelers, portray an image of ecological consciousness that is often superficial and disconnected from their actual lifestyle choices. Within the tourism sector, the figure of the “eco-traveler” has become a central archetype of ethical consumption. However, the rise of the “fake eco-traveler” - one who engages in sustainable travel primarily for the sake of social media validation or “clout” - has triggered a significant wave of social backlash. This article seeks to explore the downside of this performative posturing, specifically focusing on why and how these individuals face social discrediting [1].

The core of the issue lies in the growing “authenticity deficit” between digital personas and real-world behavior. When travelers utilize natural landscapes and “green” labels as mere backdrops for Instagram or TikTok content, they enter into a precarious contract with their audience. The public, increasingly weary of corporate greenwashing and virtue signaling, has developed a hyper-sensitive skepticism toward individual moral claims. The “social discrediting” of these travelers occurs when a gap is identified between their performative advocacy and their logistical realities, such as the use of carbon-heavy transportation or wasteful consumption habits. This backlash is often aggressive, manifesting as “eco-shaming” or public character assassination. The significance of this study lies in its attempt to deconstruct the motivations behind performative eco-tourism and to analyze why society feels the need to harshly punish those who use the environment as a prop. By examining the intersection of social media culture, moral psychology, and environmental ethics, this introduction sets the foundation for understanding the risks of performative identity in the age of global climate anxiety. Ultimately, the study argues that for sustainable tourism to be effective,



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the focus must shift from “showing” environmentalism to “practicing” it, as the social cost of inauthenticity continues to rise.

### **Literature review**

The theoretical foundation for analyzing the discrediting of performative eco-travelers is built upon an interdisciplinary synthesis of social psychology, media studies, and tourism ethics. A central concept in this analysis is “Virtue Signaling,” a term that describes the public expression of moral values intended to enhance one's social status rather than to effect real change. In the context of tourism, Mkono (2020) has extensively documented how social media platforms have transformed the “eco-traveler” into a performance. Her work suggests that the “Instagramability” of nature encourages a form of “conspicuous consumption of sustainability,” where the aesthetic value of the trip outweighs its ecological impact [10]. This performativity is often met with what Minson and Monin (2012) define as “Do-gooder Derogation.” Their research indicates that when people perceive a moral actor to be inauthentic or hypocritical, they react with intense hostility as a way to defend their own non-sustainable choices. By discrediting the “fake” eco-traveler, the audience resolves their own cognitive dissonance regarding their lack of environmental action [9].

Furthermore, the rise of the “Flight Shame” (flygskam) movement, as analyzed by Gössling et al. (2020), provides a critical framework for understanding the mechanisms of social condemnation. Their study highlights how digital audiences have become “moral police,” using inconsistencies in a traveler’s carbon footprint to invalidate their entire environmental message. This is closely linked to the concept of “Individual Greenwashing [5].” While greenwashing was traditionally a corporate critique, scholars like Beckman (2018) argue that individuals now face similar scrutiny. When an eco-influencer promotes a zero-



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waste lifestyle while flying on a private jet, the resulting “authenticity crisis” leads to a rapid loss of social trust. The literature suggests that in the digital age, “perceived hypocrisy” is the ultimate social sin, leading to immediate discrediting [2].

From a regional and systemic perspective, Uzbek scholars have contributed valuable insights into the ethical dimensions of tourism. Tukhliev (2012) emphasizes that the development of green tourism in Uzbekistan must be grounded in “ecological culture” rather than mere superficial branding [13]. He argues that if the ethical foundations of a tourism model are not genuine, they will inevitably face social resistance. Similarly, Nurmonov (2002), through his work on the systemic nature of linguistic and social units, provides a framework for understanding how “soxtalik” is decoded by society through communicative cues. When travelers use “eco” terminology incorrectly or performatively, they trigger a systemic rejection by the audience [11]. Moreover, Kadirova (2019) highlights the role of social responsibility, suggesting that in Central Asian contexts, the communal perception of “moral arrogance” in eco-tourism can lead to social alienation. By synthesizing these global and local perspectives, the literature reveals a clear trajectory: the more environmentalism becomes a performance, the more society seeks to unmask and discredit the performers. This study builds on these theories by specifically analyzing the “downside” or the social penalties of failing to maintain an authentic environmental identity [6].

### **Methodology**

The research methodology for this study is built upon a qualitative, exploratory framework designed to investigate the nuances of human behavior and social perception in digital environments. To deconstruct the motivations behind “performative eco-tourism” and analyze the subsequent process of “social



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discrediting,” the study employs a Netnographic approach - a specialized branch of ethnography that applies traditional anthropological methods to the study of online communities. This method was selected because social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X) serve as the primary “stage” for performative environmentalism and the primary “courtroom” for social judgment. By observing unfiltered public interactions, this methodology captures the raw socio-psychological triggers that lead to the discrediting of travelers perceived as inauthentic [3].

The data collection process was conducted in two primary stages. First, Purposive Sampling was utilized to identify 25 specific case studies of “high-profile environmental hypocrisy” involving travel influencers and eco-advocates between 2021 and 2024. These cases were selected based on the volume of social backlash and the presence of a “contradiction” (e.g., an influencer promoting zero-waste while using a private jet or posing in a protected wildlife area). Second, a corpus of approximately 2,000 user-generated comments was extracted from these cases to serve as the primary material for analysis. This data represents the “social jury,” providing insights into why the audience feels motivated to discredit the traveler [4].

The analytical phase of the research employed Thematic Content Analysis, following the six-phase recursive process established by Braun and Clarke. An inductive coding system was applied to categorize the public backlash into four primary thematic pillars: Moral Inconsistency, Visual Clout-Chasing, Privilege Blindness, and Performative Fatigue. This coding allowed the researchers to move beyond surface-level criticism and identify the deeper psychological drivers of the backlash. Furthermore, to enhance the validity of the findings, Theoretical Triangulation was used; the digital observations were cross-referenced with established theories such as “Moral Self-Licensing” and



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“Cognitive Dissonance,” as well as regional perspectives from Uzbek scholars regarding “ijtimoiy mas’uliyat” (social responsibility) and “obro” (reputation). Finally, the study maintained strict ethical standards in digital research. Although the data was sourced from public social media profiles, all individual commenters were anonymized to protect their privacy, and the focus of the analysis remained on the patterns of discourse rather than the personal identities of the travelers involved. The research also accounted for “Observer Bias” by utilizing two independent coders to verify the thematic categories. By integrating netnographic inquiry with rigorous thematic coding, this methodology ensures a comprehensive and reproducible analysis of the social penalties associated with performative identity in the modern environmental era. [9].

### **Results And Discussion**

The analysis of the data collected through netnographic observation reveals that the social discrediting of “fake” eco-travelers is a systematic process triggered by specific behavioral cues and digital patterns. The results of the thematic coding identify three primary pillars that lead to the rapid erosion of social trust: the Visual-Ethical Disconnect, Clout-Chasing over Conservation, and the Structural Hypocrisy of Luxury. These findings suggest that the public acts as a “decentralized moral jury,” using digital platforms to unmask what they perceive as inauthentic performances of environmentalism [7].

#### **1. The Visual-Ethical Disconnect and the “Aesthetic Trap”**

A primary result of the study is that the “aestheticization” of eco-tourism often serves as the first catalyst for social discrediting. The data showed that 68% of the analyzed critical comments focused on the “too perfect” nature of the travelers' content. When a traveler presents a highly curated, professionally edited



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image of a “pristine” environment while claiming a minimalist or eco-conscious lifestyle, it creates a “credibility deficit.” The discussion suggests that the more an eco-traveler focuses on the visual appeal of their journey, the less the audience believes in their ethical commitment. The results indicate that the public associates high production value in social media content with “performative posturing” rather than genuine environmental activism [8].

### **2. Clout-Chasing and the “Virtue Signaling” Backlash**

The results further highlight that “Virtue Signaling” - the act of expressing moral opinions primarily to enhance social standing - is the most condemned motivation among eco-travelers. In the analyzed case studies, travelers who used emotive hashtags like #SavingThePlanet or #EcoWarrior while engaging in high-impact activities (such as staying in energy-intensive five-star “eco-resorts”) faced the harshest social penalties. The discussion of these results indicates that the audience views this behavior as a commodification of nature. Instead of protecting the environment, the “fake” eco-traveler is perceived as using the environment as a “brand backdrop” to gain social capital. This leads to a process of “social shaming,” where the audience seeks to “balance the scales” by publicly attacking the traveler’s reputation.

### **3. The Psychology of the Audience: “Do-Gooder Derogation”**

One of the most significant findings in the discussion of the results is the psychological motivation of the critics. The data supports the theory of “Do-Gooder Derogation,” but with a unique digital twist. By discrediting a “fake” eco-traveler, the audience successfully resolves their own cognitive dissonance regarding the climate crisis. If the most visible advocates for the environment are shown to be “frauds,” the average observer feels less pressure to change their own



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non-sustainable habits. The results suggest that the public's obsession with "unmasking" hypocrites is, in part, a defensive mechanism intended to alleviate personal environmental guilt.

### **4. Regional Perspectives and the Crisis of "Obro"**

In the context of the regional discussion, the findings align with the views of Tukhliev (2012) and Kadirova (2019) regarding the importance of social responsibility and "obro" in Central Asian tourism discourse. The results show that in these contexts, the discrediting of eco-travelers is often linked to a perceived lack of humility. Performative environmentalism is seen not just as a lie, but as an act of "moral arrogance." When travelers from affluent backgrounds perform "poverty" or "minimalism" in eco-destinations, it triggers a class-based resentment that accelerates the process of social discrediting [12].

### **Summary of Discussion**

Ultimately, the results of this research prove that performative eco-tourism carries a high "reputational risk." The digital audience has become highly skilled at detecting the nuances of "individual greenwashing." The discussion concludes that social discrediting is a tool used by society to demand authenticity in an era of digital deception. For sustainable tourism to maintain its integrity, it must move away from the performative "clout-chasing" model and return to a practice-based approach where actions speak louder than filtered images. The "downside" of performing environmentalism is the permanent loss of social trust -a price that many modern travelers are finding too high to pay.



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### **Conclusion**

This research has deconstructed the complex socio-psychological dynamics behind "performative eco-tourism," revealing the significant social penalties associated with portraying an inauthentic environmental identity. The study concludes that the "social discrediting" of fake eco-travelers is not an accidental byproduct of digital culture but a systematic reaction from an audience that increasingly values authenticity over aesthetic performance. The findings demonstrate that the intensification of public backlash - characterized by "eco-shaming" and character devaluation - is primarily triggered by the perceived gap between a traveler's moral rhetoric and their behavioral reality. When environmentalism is used as a tool for "clout-chasing" or virtue signaling, it creates a "credibility deficit" that the digital audience feels compelled to rectify through social condemnation.

Furthermore, the research highlights that the discrediting of these travelers serves a dual psychological purpose for the public. On one hand, it acts as a mechanism for maintaining the integrity of the sustainable tourism movement by unmasking "individual greenwashing." On the other hand, it functions as a defensive mechanism, allowing observers to resolve their own cognitive dissonance by dismissing visible moral advocates as "hypocrites." This cycle of performative posturing followed by aggressive discrediting suggests that the digital medium has fundamentally altered the nature of environmental advocacy, making "perceived hypocrisy" the ultimate social transgression. From a regional perspective, the study confirms that in contexts where reputation (obro') and social responsibility (ijtimoiy mas'uliyat) are paramount, the social cost of inauthenticity is even more severe, leading to long-term alienation and loss of trust.



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In conclusion, the "downside" of performing environmentalism is a profound loss of social capital that is difficult to recover. For the sustainable tourism industry to move forward, there must be a shift in focus from the "perfection-based" performance of environmentalism to a "process-based" reality. This study suggests that both travelers and influencers must embrace "imperfect sustainability" - a model where the challenges and contradictions of ethical travel are acknowledged rather than hidden behind filters. By fostering a more transparent and humble dialogue, the tourism sector can move beyond the current crisis of authenticity and ensure that environmental advocacy remains a genuine tool for global conservation rather than a prop for social media validation. Ultimately, the future of eco-tourism depends on the transition from "showing" to "being," as the social jury of the 21st century continues to demand actions that match the filtered images.

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