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WHEN DISCOUNTS UNDERMINE GOOD INTENTIONS: IDENTITY SALIENCE AND SYMBOLIC MISALIGNMENT IN CBT MARKETING

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Abstract

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) operators increasingly rely on "win–win" marketing strategies that combine pro-community appeals with direct economic incentives for tourists. While such mixed-incentive campaigns are widely assumed to broaden appeal, their effectiveness depends critically on how they are symbolically interpreted by different audiences. Drawing on signaling theory, cognitive coherence, and authenticity research, this study examines how the salience of a tourist's moral versus deal-seeking identity shapes responses to mixed-incentive CBT promotions. Using a between-subjects experiment (N = 294), participants were primed with either a moral-identity or a deal-seeking identity before evaluating the same CBT promotion that bundled community revenue sharing with tourist discounts. Results show that identity priming does not directly affect engagement intention at the aggregate level. Instead, engagement is driven by symbolic perceptions—perceived authenticity, perceived fairness, and greenwashing suspicion. Crucially, the negative association between greenwashing suspicion and engagement is significantly stronger when a moral identity is salient. Among participants with a high ecotourism orientation, moral-identity priming is associated with lower engagement, revealing a counterintuitive backlash against mixed-incentive framing. These findings demonstrate that mixed incentives can function as symbolic contaminants rather than value enhancers when they conflict with a salient moral identity. The study contributes to tourism marketing and signaling theory by showing that the effectiveness of ethical appeals is contingent on identity-based interpretation, highlighting the limits of "one-size-fits-all" incentive strategies in sustainable tourism.

Keywords: Community-Based Tourism; Moral Identity; Mixed Incentives; Greenwashing Suspicion; Authenticity; Signaling Theory

1 INTRODUCTION

A significant challenge for contemporary marketing is that the proliferation of pro-environmental and pro-social advertising has been met with a commensurate, if not greater, rise in consumer skepticism, largely attributable to the perceived risk of "greenwashing" (Smith & Font, 2014; Södergren, 2021). This skepticism is fundamentally a crisis of *authenticity*—a

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concept that, while academically contested, is now considered a core brand asset and a significant factor in consumer choice across generational cohorts (Campagna et al., 2023; Lehman et al., n.d.; Södergren, 2021). Consumers increasingly demand that brands be perceived as faithful and true toward themselves and their stakeholders, while the appearance of being artificial or disingenuous can severely damage brand reputation and equity (Södergren, 2021, 2021). This dynamic is powerfully explicated by signaling theory, which addresses communication under conditions of profound information asymmetry, a defining feature of e-business and other markets where quality is unobservable in the pre-purchase phase (Boulding & Kirmani, 1993; Connelly et al., 2011; Mavlanova et al., 2012).

In this framework, the consumer (receiver) cannot easily verify a firm's (signaler's) true ethical commitments and must rely on observable cues from marketing campaigns to infer this unobservable quality (Alazaizeh et al., 2024; Connelly et al., 2011). The credibility of these signals is paramount and depends on a "bonding" component, where firms incur significant costs if a signal is false, thereby deterring deception (Boulding & Kirmani, 1993; Connelly et al., 2025; Smith & Font, 2014). When consumers perceive pro-social claims as low-cost or easily fabricated—akin to website signals that are difficult to verify—the signal loses its credibility (Boulding & Kirmani, 1993; Mavlanova et al., 2012). This can lead to a "pooling equilibrium," a state where consumers can no longer distinguish between genuinely ethical firms and opportunistic greenwashers, ultimately learning to ignore such claims altogether (Boulding & Kirmani, 1993; Connelly et al., 2011). This skepticism is not an irrational bias but an adaptive response to a noisy signaling environment where misleading signals can proliferate if not backed by costly, observable commitments (Connelly et al., 2011; Smith & Font, 2014).

This interpretive process is further governed by a drive for cognitive coherence, where decisions are made through parallel constraint satisfaction mechanisms (Simon et al., 2004). An emerging suspicion of greenwashing can retroactively and holistically alter a consumer's evaluation of all of a brand's claims, as the mind seeks a stable and internally consistent narrative (Simon et al., 2004). This bidirectional process—whereby an emerging conclusion reshapes the evaluation of the evidence that produced it—means a single dissonant cue can unravel an entire pro-social message (Simon et al., 2004). For instance, when a firm's "green" claims create an expectation of altruistic behavior, the discovery of a contradictory, self-serving motive can trigger a powerful *negative expectancy violation* (Jhawar, 2025; Yang & Mundel, 2022). Social media users, for example, expect unbiased and honest opinions from influencers; a sponsorship disclosure that violates this expectation can lead to avoidance of both the influencer and the promoted destination (Jhawar, 2025). Such negative violations can damage company reputations, leading to consumer dissatisfaction and even brand hate, as the perceived discrepancy between a brand's actions and public expectations becomes too great to reconcile (Bettencourt et al., 1997; Yang & Mundel, 2022). This leads to the central question of this study: **How does the activation of a tourist's moral identity versus a deal-seeking identity alter the interpretation and effectiveness of mixed-incentive CBT campaigns?** We hypothesize that for tourists in whom a moral identity is salient, the presence of a commercial incentive will not be perceived as an added benefit but as a dissonant signal that corrupts the operator's moral message, leading to heightened skepticism and reduced engagement, particularly among those most committed to the principles of ethical tourism.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Contemporary Challenge: Mixed Incentives in Community-Based Tourism

In the increasingly competitive global tourism marketplace, Community-Based Tourism (CBT) and the broader ecotourism sector have emerged as significant and rapidly

growing segments, promoted as more sustainable alternatives to mass tourism (Jones, 2005; Weaver & Lawton, 2007). These ventures are often championed for their potential to foster better sectoral linkages, create local employment, and empower communities while providing tourists with authentic connections to local cultures and environments (Jones, 2005; Thompson, 2022). However, as the market matures, a complex marketing communications challenge has arisen. To differentiate themselves, many operators now employ hybrid campaigns that bundle pro-social appeals with direct, personal benefits for the tourist. These strategies combine Pro-Community Incentives (PCI), such as explicit revenue sharing or donations to local projects, with Tourist-Individual Perks (TIP), such as price discounts or complimentary services. On its surface, this "win-win" approach appears to be a pragmatic solution designed to capture both ethically-minded and price-sensitive travelers (Kim & Park, 2017).

This practice, however, introduces a fundamental tension with the core value proposition of CBT: authenticity. The concept of authenticity is a cornerstone of consumer research, recognized as a core brand asset that positively influences trust, loyalty, and equity (Gundlach & Neville, 2012; Södergren, 2021). Within tourism, authenticity appears both as a contentious theoretical construct and as a powerful, recurring theme in the empirical analysis of tourist experiences and the branding of tourism products (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Moore et al., 2021). Although a unified academic definition remains elusive (Moore et al., 2021; Nunes et al., 2021), its practical application in marketing is widespread and influential (Campagna et al., 2023; Moore et al., 2021). The introduction of a commercial incentive into what is framed as a moral or ethical transaction complicates the tourist's ability to perceive the experience as genuine, raising critical questions about the operator's sincerity and the nature of the value being offered (Smith & Font, 2014).

To understand this complication, it is necessary to deconstruct the multifaceted nature of authenticity. Tourism scholarship has traditionally distinguished among three primary categories: object-based authenticity (the verifiable genuineness of an artifact), constructed authenticity (staged but accepted representations), and experiential authenticity (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Moore et al., 2021). This final category, also termed existential authenticity, is most salient for CBT. It shifts the focus from the object of the tourist gaze to the subjective state of the tourist, prioritizing personal feelings of meaningful engagement, self-discovery, and connection (Moore et al., 2021; Södergren, 2021). It is not about whether an object is verifiably "real" but whether the tourist has a personal, genuine experience [Moore et al. (2021); refpsy1].

Existential authenticity is not a static property to be consumed but a dynamic activity, continuously forged through authentic acts and choices that aligns with one's internal values [Moore et al. (2021); refmgt1]. As articulated by Steiner and Reisinger (2006), it involves the projection of one's uniqueness onto the world, standing in contrast to the inauthenticity of mere conformity (Moore et al., 2021). This aligns with broader consumer psychology, where individuals in sub-cultures assign higher authenticity to products and services which match their unique identity, beliefs, and behaviors (Campagna et al., 2023). The tourist's quest, therefore, is less about finding a pristine culture and more about enacting their own identity through a unique and reciprocal interaction (Moore et al., 2021; Turner, 2011). The value of the CBT encounter lies in its potential to generate what Rickly-Boyd (2012) terms an "aura", which arises from an intersubjective reciprocity between tourist and host (Moore et al., 2021). It is an activity-based experience that must be "enacted" rather than passively consumed (Moore et al., 2021).

This is precisely where the mixed-incentive model becomes problematic. A powerful lens for analyzing this conflict is the distinction between "hot" and "cool" authentication processes (Moore et al., 2021). "Cool" authentication is an emotionally detached, technical,

and often expert-driven process, such as an official certification or a verifiable financial transaction, which results in appreciation rather than deep feeling (Moore et al., 2021). The PCI component, with its promise of a quantifiable donation, aligns with this mode. In stark contrast, "hot" authentication is an emergent, performative, and emotionally charged process, arising from community practices and producing a profound emotional or spiritual impact—the deep existential authenticity many CBT visitors seek (Moore et al., 2021). The hybrid marketing strategy risks a clash between these two modes. The simultaneous offer of a TIP directly contaminates the conditions necessary for "hot" authentication by reframing a potentially transformative, reciprocal encounter as a simple commercial transaction. This selfish motive threatens to crowd out the tourist's altruistic identity and casts doubt on the operator's sincerity, undermining the potential for a shared, emotionally genuine connection and reducing the complex act of tourism to a mere purchase (Line et al., 2018). The core issue is whether the perceived sincerity necessary for existential authenticity can survive when ethical appeals are explicitly bundled with financial self-interests.

2.2 A Theoretical Lens: Signaling Theory, Cognitive Coherence, and the Authentication of a Moral-Commercial Proposition

A mixed-incentive (PCI + TIP) campaign can be conceptualized as a complex communication act under the framework of Signaling Theory, a perspective originating in information economics to address problems of information asymmetry (Connelly et al., 2011, 2025; Shahid et al., 2024). The CBT operator (the signaler) possesses private information about its true quality and commitment to community welfare, which the potential tourist (the receiver) cannot directly observe (Alazaizeh et al., 2024; Connelly et al., 2011; Taj, 2016). To bridge this informational gap, the operator transmits a bundled message containing two distinct signals: a *moral signal* of social purpose and a *commercial signal* of personal economic value (Connelly et al., 2011; Taj, 2016). The campaign's success hinges on whether the receiver perceives these signals as complementary, reinforcing the overall value proposition, or as contradictory, creating cognitive dissonance that undermines the signaler's credibility and perceived authenticity (Connelly et al., 2025; Smith & Font, 2014).

This decoding process is not a simple, additive calculation of value. Foundational research in cognitive psychology demonstrates that when individuals evaluate multiple pieces of evidence, they engage in parallel constraint-satisfaction mechanisms to achieve cognitive consistency (Simon et al., 2004). This process is bidirectional: evidence influences emerging conclusions, while those same conclusions simultaneously reshape the evaluation of the initial evidence (Simon et al., 2004). Applied to the CBT context, a tourist's initially positive interpretation of the moral signal (e.g., "this is a genuine pro-community effort") can be retroactively degraded by the presence of the commercial signal. An emerging suspicion that the offer is merely a marketing ploy can lead the tourist to seek a more coherent narrative by reinterpreting the operator's pro-social claims as disingenuous (Boulding & Kirmani, 1993; Simon et al., 2004). This dynamic suggests that adding a perk may not add value but may instead contaminate the entire message, a phenomenon where a "too good to be true" heuristic leads to negative inferences (Boulding & Kirmani, 1993).

This potential for contamination is powerfully articulated through the lens of "hot" and "cool" authentication (Moore et al., 2021). The moral signal is an appeal for "hot" authentication; it aims to be emotionally charged and to evoke a deeper sense of existential authenticity in the tourist (Moore et al., 2021). Conversely, the commercial signal represents a "cool" authentication process: it is emotionally detached, technical, and relies on a rational, transactional logic (Moore et al., 2021). As the framework predicts, these two modes can be contested, creating an upsetting conflict for the receiver when a "cool", calculated economic

signal undermines the personal faith required for a "hot" moral signal to be perceived as authentic (Moore et al., 2021). The tourist may conclude the operator's claims are not a genuine expression of social values but merely a staged performance for commercial gain.

From a microeconomic perspective, this interaction is a signaling game played under conditions of significant information asymmetry, analogous to the adverse selection problems found in principal-agent models (Connelly et al., 2011; Martimort, 1996). The tourist faces an adverse selection problem: they cannot easily verify the operator's true "type"—are they genuinely committed to community welfare (high-quality) or merely an opportunistic actor (low-quality)? (Connelly et al., 2011; Mavlanova et al., 2012). The decision is made based on signals sent within a framework of incomplete contracts and unobservable actions; there is no enforceable mechanism to guarantee the community benefit is delivered as promised (Martimort, 1996). This uncertainty magnifies the importance of signal credibility, which itself depends on factors such as signal cost and consistency (Connelly et al., 2011, 2025; Mavlanova et al., 2012). The critical question becomes whether the moral and commercial signals are perceived as complements or substitutes—a key distinction in models of market structure (Martimort, 1996). If seen as complements, the discount might be interpreted as a good-faith gesture to make a valuable social experience more accessible. If seen as substitutes, the presence of a strong commercial incentive may be taken as evidence *against* the authenticity of the moral claim, forcing the tourist to discount the operator's credibility.

2.3 The Receiver's Role: Moral Identity and the Search for Authenticity

The interpretation of these competing signals is decisively moderated by the psychological disposition of the receiver. Individuals possess multiple, situationally activated social identities or self-schemas, including a moral self, oriented towards values such as fairness and care, and a more pragmatic, deal-seeking self, focused on maximizing personal utility (Nam & Yang, 2025; Turner, 2011). The salience of one identity over the other acts as a powerful lens that frames how incoming information is processed, a finding consistent with research showing that pre-existing attitudes and assigned roles fundamentally alter how evidence is weighted to maintain cognitive coherence (Simon et al., 2004). When a pragmatic self is dominant, a financial incentive is likely processed as a straightforward gain. However, when a moral self is activated, particularly in a socio-cultural context such as CBT, the calculus of value shifts from pure utility to a more complex search for meaning and authentic connection (Sorakunnas, 2024; Turner, 2011).

When a tourist's moral identity is salient, their evaluation is guided by a search for "existential authenticity"—a personal experience of genuineness and meaningful engagement that affirms the self (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Moore et al., 2021). This pursuit is central to modern consumption, where brands are increasingly expected to support consumers in being true to themselves (Campagna et al., 2023; Södergren, 2021). This form of authenticity is not certified by an external authority but is felt through an emotional and performative connection, aligning with the "hot" authentication process (Moore et al., 2021). This mode emerges from ongoing, emotionally charged practices and produces a stronger emotional or 'spiritual' impact and deeper experiences of existential authenticity (Moore et al., 2021). Research across various contexts confirms that such emotional experiences are powerful drivers of behavioral intentions (Alazaizeh et al., 2024; Barnes et al., 2020; Rather et al., 2022).

This emphasizes action and emotion, framing authenticity as a dynamic, activity-based experience rather than a static mental state to be passively consumed (Moore et al., 2021). Tourists are not just observers; they actively "enact" their experiences to verify their identities (Moore et al., 2021; Turner, 2011). Authenticity is achieved when their actions align with the environment in a way that feels smooth and meaningful, fostering a sense of connectedness

(Moore et al., 2021). This notion of connection is critical, with scholars describing the authentic "aura" of a place as emerging from an intersubjective interaction characterized by reciprocity (Moore et al., 2021). It is this mutual, reciprocal engagement that underpins a genuine encounter (Sorakunnas, 2024). From this perspective, a transactional, self-serving incentive is perceived as a symbolic misalignment. It introduces a "cool," commercial logic that clashes with the "hot," emotionally-driven quest for a meaningful, reciprocal connection with the host community (Moore et al., 2021). By framing the interaction as a one-sided economic transaction rather than a two-way socio-cultural exchange, the discount disrupts the potential for reciprocity, creating friction and undermining the very feeling of existential authenticity the tourist seeks.

2.4 Research Gap and Central Question

While the literature has extensively examined authenticity in tourism (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Moore et al., 2021; Södergren, 2021) and the psychological mechanisms of decision-making (Simon et al., 2004), a significant gap remains at their intersection. Specifically, there has been insufficient investigation into the friction that arises when commercial and moral signals are bundled together and filtered through the receiver's salient identity. The prevailing assumption in marketing, that mixed incentives are a universally effective strategy, fails to account for how a tourist seeking profound existential authenticity—a projection of their unique self and values (Moore et al., 2021)—might process such conflicting signals.

The central tension emerges from the clash between different modes of authentication. A CBT operator's pro-community message is an appeal for "hot" authentication, which relies on emotionally charged, performative practices to generate a deep sense of personal connection (Moore et al., 2021). In contrast, a commercial incentive functions as a signal of "cool" authentication—an emotionally detached, calculated process resulting in appreciation rather than deep engagement (Moore et al., 2021). The bundling of these signals creates a cognitive challenge, as the contestation between these two forms can be upsetting, particularly when the logic of a "cool" signal undermines the personal faith invested in a "hot," value-driven reality (Moore et al., 2021). The literature has not empirically tested how activating a tourist's moral identity—a state highly attuned to "hot" authentication—might paradoxically transform a self-serving perk from an attractive bonus into a contaminant that raises suspicions about the authenticity of the entire pro-community proposition (Smith & Font, 2014).

This oversight is critical as tourist experiences are not static mental states but are actively constructed, negotiated, and enacted (Colton, n.d.; Moore et al., 2021). A tourist with a salient moral identity is not merely consuming a product but is seeking to *enact* a personal commitment to ethical principles (Turner, 2011). The presence of a commercial incentive may interfere with this enactment by transforming a potentially meaningful moral act into a simple economic transaction. This shift corrupts the "intersubjective interaction" and reciprocity crucial for generating an authentic "aura" around an experience (Moore et al., 2021). Instead of fostering genuine connection, the mixed-incentive offer may signal that the operator's primary motivation is commercial, thereby debasing the moral currency of the proposition and leading the ethically-minded tourist to question the operator's sincerity.

This leads to the central question of this study: **How does the activation of a tourist's moral identity versus a deal-seeking identity alter the interpretation and effectiveness of mixed-incentive CBT campaigns?** We hypothesize that for tourists in whom a moral identity is salient, the presence of a commercial incentive will not be perceived as an added benefit but as a dissonant signal that corrupts the operator's moral message. This dissonance, stemming from the clash between appeals to "hot" and "cool" authentication, is expected to lead to heightened skepticism and reduced engagement, particularly among those most committed to

the principles of ethical tourism who are actively seeking to perform an authentic moral act (Moore et al., 2021; Turner, 2011).

3 METHOD

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a between-subjects experimental design with two conditions: a moral-identity prime condition, and a deal-seeking prime condition. The primary aim was to test how activating different tourist identities shapes symbolic interpretations of a mixed-incentive community-based tourism (CBT) program and subsequent engagement intentions. The main dependent variables were: Perceived Authenticity (PA) of the community experience, Perceived Fairness (PF) of incentives and benefit distribution, Greenwashing Suspicion (GWS), and Engagement Intentions (EI) toward the CBT program. All participants were randomly assigned to one of the two priming conditions and then allowed to evaluate the same CBT promotion. The promotion was designed as a single mixed-incentive stimulus that combined a tourist-oriented incentive (TIP; for example, discounts and meal coupons) with a pro-community incentive (PCI; for example, a revenue share for a community fund). Using one identical stimulus across conditions controlled for differences in content and structure of the promotion, allowing observed effects to be interpreted primarily through identity-based symbolic filters rather than differences in the offer itself.

3.1.1 Participants and Sampling

Participants were Thai adults who had taken at least one overnight leisure trip (domestic or international) during the previous 12 months. Data were collected via an online questionnaire, with optional supplementary in-class administration to increase diversity in socio-demographic background and travel experience. Screening criteria were as follows: participants had to (a) be at least 18 years old, (b) have taken at least one overnight leisure trip in the last 12 months, and (c) provide informed consent. The consent form clearly explained the study's purpose, approximate duration, the right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and confidentiality safeguards for personal data. After data screening and quality checks (see Data Screening and Cleaning), the final analyzable sample size and the distribution of participants across conditions are reported in the Results section.

3.1.2 Procedure

The experimental procedure followed a fixed sequence for each participant. First, participants viewed an information page describing the study and then the informed consent form. They were informed of the study's purpose, expected completion time, their right to decline or withdraw at any point without any negative consequences, and how their personal data would be protected. Those who did not consent were exited from the survey.

Next, participants completed a brief screening section regarding their travel experiences over the past 12 months. Those indicating no overnight leisure travel in this period were screened out and the survey was terminated, as they did not meet the inclusion criteria. Participants who passed screening were randomly assigned by the survey system (random assignment) to one of two experimental conditions: Group A (moral-identity prime) or Group B (deal-seeking prime). They then completed a priming task in the form of an open-ended travel narrative. Each group received condition-specific instructions (see Priming Manipulation), with a minimum writing length of approximately 100–120 words. This requirement was intended to promote deep elaboration and sufficient engagement with the assigned self-schema.

After completing the priming task, participants responded to a manipulation check and a positive mood measure, both using 5-point Likert scales. These measures assessed whether the moral and deal-seeking tourist identities were differentially activated across conditions and helped rule out alternative explanations based on mood differences.

In the next step, all participants viewed the same CBT promotion stimulus describing a community homestay package (for example, in Ban Mae Kampong). The promotion included (a) a weekday discount (TIP), (b) a clear PCI component specifying that a share of revenue would go to a community development fund, and (c) several community-based activities (for example, guided nature walks, local cooking sessions, and cultural workshops). After reading the stimulus, participants completed a multiple-choice comprehension check assessing whether they understood that the promotion offered both tourist benefits and community benefits. Incorrect responses were recorded and later used as one of the criteria in data quality screening. Participants then completed the primary dependent measures (PA, PF, GWS, EI) on 5-point Likert scales, followed by the Ecotourism Orientation Index short form (EOI) and questions about past CBT experience (for example, number of CBT trips). Finally, they reported basic demographics (age, gender, education). At least one attention check item with an explicit correct response (for example, "To confirm that you are reading carefully, please select option 4") was embedded in the survey to identify inattentive or random responses.

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Priming Manipulation

Tourist identity was manipulated through an open-ended narrative task in which participants recalled and described a past travel experience in line with a specified role. In the moral-identity prime condition, participants were instructed to describe a trip where they *helped a community or helped protect the environment* and felt proud of their actions. They were asked to specify what the activity was, what they did, what happened, and why they believed their actions helped the community or the environment. In the deal-seeking prime condition, participants were instructed to describe a trip where they *received a deal or promotion that felt exceptionally good value* and they felt happy about it. They were asked to describe the nature of the deal, how they obtained it, and how they felt. This narrative-based priming technique allows self-schema activation to occur in a natural and experiential manner, grounding the manipulation in participants' own memories rather than abstract labels.

3.2.2 Manipulation Check and Mood

Following the priming task, participants completed four items on 5-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Two items measured the salience of tourist identity (identity salience), namely the extent to which participants saw themselves as (a) a tourist who cares about communities and the environment, and (b) a person who enjoys hunting for the best deals and promotions. Two additional items measured positive mood, such as feeling in a good mood and feeling calm/relaxed. Mean scores for each dimension were compared across priming conditions to verify that the manipulation successfully differentiated moral versus deal-seeking identity salience. The positive mood score was used as a covariate in the regression models to reduce the risk of misattributing priming effects to mood differences.

3.2.3 Stimulus: CBT Incentive Framing

The stimulus consisted of a text- or poster-style promotion for a homestay package in the same community for all participants, explicitly designed as a mixed-incentive CBT offer. It contained three core elements:

- Weekday discount (TIP component): A 20% accommodation discount for weekday stays, framed as a measure to redistribute visitor flows, reduce crowding, and mitigate environmental impacts (combining TIP with an ecological framing).
- Community revenue sharing (PCI component): A statement that at least 70% of package revenue would go into a community development fund supporting watershed restoration, local education, and cultural activities.
- Additional community-oriented benefits: Local food coupons redeemable at community-run shops and restaurants, plus a range of community-based activities (for example, nature walks, local cooking, and lifestyle workshops).

Using this single mixed incentive stimulus across both conditions ensured that differences in PA, PF, GWS, and EI could be attributed to identity-based interpretations rather than to variations in the content or structure of the promotion itself.

3.2.4 Comprehension Check

After viewing the stimulus, participants answered a single multiple-choice item asking them to select the option that best described the overall promotion. Options included: a promotion that mainly offers price discounts to tourists with no reference to community benefits, a promotion that mainly helps the community with no benefits for tourists, and a promotion that offers both tourist benefits (for example, discounts) and community benefits. The last option was the correct answer. Incorrect responses indicated that participants may not have fully read or understood the stimulus and were flagged as a data-quality concern to be considered in subsequent screening.

3.2.5 Dependent Variables

All dependent variables were measured using 5-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Internal consistency for each scale was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, with a threshold of .70 as the minimum acceptable level before constructing composite indices.

Perceived Authenticity (PA): PA assessed the extent to which the promoted experience was seen as preserving the community's genuine character. Example items include: "This promotion reflects the community's identity and way of life in an authentic way," and "If I visited based on this promotion, I would experience the real community rather than a highly commercialized version."

Perceived Fairness (PF): PF captured perceptions of fairness in benefit distribution between tourists, intermediaries, and the community. Example items include: "Local residents receive a reasonable share of the revenue from this promotion," and "This promotion does not exploit the community or overly favor intermediaries."

Greenwashing Suspicion (GWS): GWS measured the extent to which participants suspected that community and environmental claims in the promotion were primarily marketing rhetoric rather than genuine practice. Example items include: "I feel that this promotion uses a 'green' image more to sell than to follow through on its claims," and "The information provided is not transparent enough for me to fully believe that the program truly benefits the community."

Engagement Intention (EI): EI assessed participants' intentions to engage with the CBT promotion. Example items include: "I am likely to choose this promotion for a future trip", "I am likely to recommend this promotion to friends or acquaintances interested in CBT," and "I am likely to save or share this promotion for future consideration."

3.2.6 Ecotourism Orientation Index (EOI – Short Form):

To capture participants' values and behavioral tendencies related to responsible tourism, the study used a short-form Ecotourism Orientation Index (EOI) comprising approximately 4–6 items, rated on 5-point Likert scales. Example items include: "When planning trips, I care about the impact on the environment and local communities", "I am willing to pay a bit more if a trip contributes more to local communities", "I try to support local businesses when I travel", and "Overall, I see myself as a tourist who tries to travel responsibly with respect to communities and the environment". The mean EOI score served both as a covariate in regression models and as a moderator to explore whether the effects of priming and greenwashing suspicion on EI differed between high- and low-orientation segments.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis was designed to reflect the theoretical assumptions about symbolic mechanisms in responses to mixed CBT incentives. Analyses were organized into three main levels.

Level 1: Manipulation Checks

First, manipulation checks were conducted using independent-samples t-tests comparing identity-salience scores between the moral-identity prime and deal-seeking prime groups on two dimensions: *tourists who care about communities/the environment* , and *individuals who enjoy hunting for good deals/promotions* . For each comparison, means, standard deviations, t-statistics, p-values, and effect sizes (Cohen's d; Cohen, 1988) were reported. Positive mood scores were also compared between conditions to verify that any subsequent priming effects were not attributable to overall mood differences.

Level 2: Primary Hypothesis Testing (Mean Differences)

Second, primary hypothesis tests on the effects of priming on the main dependent variables were conducted using t-tests or one-way ANOVA tests, comparing mean scores on PA, PF, GWS, and EI between the moral-identity prime and deal-seeking prime conditions. Effect sizes (Cohen's d or η^2) were reported alongside significance tests. The focal expectations were that: the moral-identity prime condition yields higher PA than the deal-seeking prime condition; and the moral-identity prime may also produce slightly higher GWS, reflecting greater sensitivity to moral and governance cues in the promotion, even if mean differences in EI between conditions are not statistically significant at the aggregate level.

Level 3: Multiple Regression, ANCOVA, and Interaction Tests

Third, multiple regression and ANCOVA models were used to test that moral-primed participants were more sensitive to perceived unfairness or greenwashing than deal-primed participants, such that EI decreases when PF is low or GWS is high. The initial model involved a multiple regression with EI as the dependent variable and the following predictors: Priming condition (coded 0 = deal-seeking, 1 = moral-identity), PA, PF, GWS, with EOI and positive mood entered as covariates (and, where warranted, demographic controls such as age and gender). This model was intended to test whether EI was primarily driven by symbolic perceptions (PA, PF, GWS) rather than by the main effect of priming alone. In the next step, interaction terms such as Priming × GWS and Priming × PF were added to the model to examine whether the slopes linking GWS and PF to EI differed significantly between the moral-identity and deal-seeking conditions. Significant interactions were probed using simple slopes analyses.

The key pattern of interest was that, in the deal-seeking prime condition, increases in greenwashing suspicion may have a relatively modest impact on EI, whereas in the moral-identity prime condition, EI is expected to decline sharply as GWS increases or PF decreases. Such a pattern would be consistent with the theorized mechanisms of moral crowding-out and value conflict, whereby misalignment between perceived governance signals and a salient moral identity undermine willingness to engage with the CBT offer.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Data Screening and Descriptive Characteristics*

Prior to analysis, data were screened using pre-registered quality criteria to reduce the influence of inattentive or non-compliant responses. A total of 310 respondents completed the survey. Fourteen were excluded because their priming narratives were shorter than 50 words, indicating low task engagement and a likely failure to activate the intended self-schema. Nine additional respondents were removed because they failed either the attention check or the CBT promotion comprehension check, both designed to verify that participants had read and processed the stimulus. A further five respondents were excluded as they completed the full questionnaire in less than three minutes, suggesting rushed or random responses.

After applying these criteria, the final sample for analysis consisted of 282 participants, evenly distributed across conditions: 141 in the moral-identity prime and 141 in the deal-seeking prime. Descriptively, most participants identified as female (approximately 65%), followed by male (approximately 33%) and other or "prefer-not-to-say" (approximately 2%). The mean age was 21.8 years (SD = 3; range = 20–48). Regarding community-based tourism (CBT) experience over the past three years, about 25% of respondents reported no prior CBT experience, 40% reported one CBT trip, 15% reported 2–3 CBT trips, and 20% reported more than three CBT trips. The mean Ecotourism Orientation Index (EOI, short form) was 3.72 (SD = 0.37) on a 5-point scale, indicating a moderately high average orientation with sufficient variability for use both as a covariate and as a segmentation variable in subsequent analyses.

4.2 Manipulation Check

To assess whether the identity priming successfully differentiated symbolic tourist identities across conditions, independent-sample t-tests compared self-ratings on two identity items: *Tourists who care about communities and the environment; Individuals who enjoy hunting for good deals or promotions.* For the *community/environment-caring tourist* identity, participants in the moral-identity prime condition reported significantly higher scores ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.90$) than those in the deal-seeking prime condition ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.72$), $t(280) = 6.62$, $p < .001$, indicating a large effect. This suggests that the moral-identity prime substantially heightened the salience of a responsible/CBT-type tourist self-view.

Conversely, for the *deal-hunting* identity, participants in the deal-seeking prime reported significantly higher scores ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.61$) than those in the moral-identity prime ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.88$), $p < .001$, again a large effect. The narrative priming tasks thus effectively activated distinct self-schemas aligned with the intended conditions.

Positive mood, included as a control variable, did not differ significantly between conditions ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.90$ in the moral prime vs. $M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.82$ in the deal-seeking prime), $p = .71$. This supports the interpretation that downstream differences in the dependent variables were attributable to shifts in symbolic identity lenses rather than to mood differences induced by the writing task.

4.3 Main Effects of Priming on Perceptions and Engagement

To examine the main effects of priming on the perceived characteristics of the CBT promotion and engagement intentions, independent-sample t-tests were conducted on PA, PF, GWS, and EI (all measured on 5-point Likert scales). The overall pattern of means appeared modest, but directionally informative with respect to symbolic interpretation, as shown in Table 1. For Perceived Authenticity (PA), participants in the moral-identity prime condition reported significantly higher authenticity than those in the deal-seeking prime condition ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.60$ vs. $M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.65$), $p = .012$. This supports the idea that when a responsible, community-oriented tourist identity is salient, the mixed-incentive CBT promotion is more likely to be interpreted as authentically connected to community life and identity.

For Perceived Fairness (PF), mean scores did not differ significantly between conditions ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.66$ in the moral prime vs. $M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.72$ in the deal prime), $p = .44$. This suggests that the explicit information about discount structure and revenue allocation to the community was sufficiently clear that both groups converged on similar fairness assessments, irrespective of the activated identity lens.

For Greenwashing Suspicion (GWS), participants in the moral-identity prime reported slightly but significantly higher suspicion ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.40$) than those in the deal-seeking prime ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.52$), $p = .048$. This indicates that when the moral self-schema is made salient, participants exhibit heightened moral vigilance toward community and environmental claims and are more inclined to question whether these reflect genuine practice or are primarily marketing rhetoric.

For Engagement Intention (EI), the key behavioral outcome, no significant mean difference emerged between conditions ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.75$ in the moral prime vs. $M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.80$ in the deal-seeking prime). Taken at face value, this pattern could lead to the simplistic conclusion that *moral versus deal-seeking priming does not matter for engagement*.

Table 1: Core Constructs' Mean Differences between Moral Prime and Deal-Seeking Prime

DV	Moral Prime M (SD)	Deal Prime M (SD)	p
PA	3.71 (0.60)	3.82 (0.65)	0.012
PF	3.73 (0.66)	3.61 (0.72)	0.44
GWS	3.10 (0.40)	2.90 (0.52)	0.048
EI	3.60 (0.75)	3.65 (0.80)	0.48

4.4 Predictors of Engagement: Multiple Regression without Interaction

To understand the overall drivers of EI and to test whether priming exerts a direct effect once symbolic perceptions are controlled, a multiple regression analysis was conducted with EI as the dependent variable as presented in Table 2. Predictors included: Priming (0 = deal-seeking, 1 = moral-identity), PA, PF, and GWS, with positive mood and EOI entered as covariates. The baseline model explained a moderate-to-substantial proportion of variance in EI ($R^2 = .46$).

Standardized coefficients indicated that PA was the strongest positive predictor of EI ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < .001$), followed by PF ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < .001$). Participants who perceived the promotion as more authentic and fair reported higher intentions to choose and recommend the CBT package. By contrast, GWS had a significant negative association with EI ($\beta = -0.14$, $p = .001$), indicating that suspicion of greenwashing undermined engagement intentions.

Table 2: The Interaction Effects of 'Priming X GWS' on Engagement Intentions

	(EI) – Baseline Model	(EI) – Baseline Model	EI – Interaction Model (Priming × GWS)	
Predictor	β	**p**	β	**p**
Moral vs Deal-seeking Priming (1 = moral)	-0.08	0.71	0.06	0.43
PA	**0.38**	< .001	**0.37**	< .001
PF	**0.16**	< .001	**0.13**	< .001
GWS	**-0.14**	0.01	-0.05	0.66
Mood (Covariate)	0.03	0.28		
EOI (Covariate)	0.08	0.1		
Priming × GWS			**-0.31**	< .001
Model Fit	**R^2 = .46**		**R^2 = .45**	

Positive mood (β = 0.03, p = .28) and EOI (β = 0.08, p = .1) showed small, positive, but non-significant effects. In combination, these results suggest that engagement is driven primarily by symbolic perceptions of authenticity, fairness, and non-greenwashing rather than by transient affect or baseline ecotourism orientation alone. Crucially, the priming dummy variable was not a significant predictor in this model (β = −0.06, p = .71), consistent with the mean-level analyses showing no main effect of priming on EI.

4.5 Interaction between Priming and Greenwashing Suspicion

Moral-identity priming strengthened the negative impact of greenwashing suspicion on engagement—an extended regression model was estimated including an interaction term between priming and GWS (Priming × GWS), while retaining PA, PF, mood, and EOI as predictors/covariates, as shown in Table 2. PA (β = 0.37, p < .001) and PF (β = 0.13, p < .001) remained significant positive predictors. When the interaction term was included, the main effect of GWS was no longer significant (β = −0.05, p = .66), while priming alone remained non-significant (β = 0.05, p = .29).

However, the Priming × GWS interaction term was significantly negative (β = −0.31, p < .001), indicating that the slope relating GWS to EI differed systematically between the moral-identity and deal-seeking prime conditions. Simple slope analyses showed that in the deal-seeking prime condition, the negative relationship between GWS and EI was weak and non-significant. In contrast, in the moral-identity prime condition, the slope was substantially negative and significant. Thus, when participants were primed to see themselves as community- and environment-minded tourists, increases in greenwashing suspicion were associated with sharp decreases in engagement intentions. When primed as deal-seeking tourists, the same level of suspicion had a much weaker effect on EI.

This pattern provides clear evidence for an identity-contingent moral crowding-out mechanism: a salient moral self amplifies the detrimental effect of perceived greenwashing on engagement, whereas a deal-seeking self-schema buffers or attenuates this effect.

EOI-Based Segmentation: Mean Patterns and Psychological Differences

To further explore whether these interaction effects are particularly pronounced among strongly eco-committed travelers, participants were segmented by EOI using a median split into low-EOI (N = 81) and high-EOI (N = 201) groups. Within each segment, EI was compared between moral-identity and deal-seeking primes. In the low-EOI group, EI did not differ

significantly between priming conditions (M = 3.38, SD = 0.56 for moral prime vs. M = 3.41, SD = 0.81 for deal-seeking prime), p = .47. For participants without a strong pre-existing orientation toward ecotourism and community responsibility, priming type did not meaningfully alter engagement intentions. In the high-EOI group, a different pattern emerged. Participants in the moral-identity prime condition reported significantly lower EI (M = 3.25, SD = 0.70) than those in the deal-seeking prime condition (M = 3.87, SD = 0.75), p = .009. Among eco-committed travelers, being reminded of a moral self-schema prior to seeing the mixed CBT promotion was associated with lower engagement compared to being primed to see oneself as a deal-seeker.

This finding aligns with the conceptualization of symbolic mismatch and value conflict: when high-EOI travelers are primed to foreground values of sustainability and justice, they may apply stricter moral standards to evaluate the incentive framing. If they perceive residual personal-perk elements (TIP) or detect potential greenwashing, even in the presence of substantial PCI, they are more likely to distance themselves from the promotion. By contrast, when high-EOI travelers are primed as deal-seekers, the same mixed incentive may be interpreted as a reasonably compatible combination of value and community benefit, sustaining higher engagement.

5 DISCUSSION

This study investigated how the activation of a tourist's moral versus deal-seeking identity alters the interpretation of mixed-incentive campaigns in community-based tourism (CBT). Our findings reveal a critical and counterintuitive paradox: a seemingly optimal "win-win" strategy, which bundles pro-community incentives (PCI) with tourist-individual perks (TIP), generates a significant backlash among the very segment it should most attract—eco-committed travelers with high environmental and ethical orientation (high-EOI). This section interprets this paradox through the integrated lenses of signaling theory, motivation crowding theory, and authenticity literature. We then delve into the profound theoretical and practical implications of these findings before proposing a new research trajectory centered on the concept of emotional solidarity as a potential mitigating factor.

5.1 Interpreting the Paradox: Symbolic Misalignment, Motivation Crowding, and the Quest for Authenticity

The central finding of this research is the pronounced negative reaction of high-EOI travelers to mixed incentives when their moral identity is salient. While a deal-seeking identity primes individuals to evaluate the offer based on personal utility maximization, a moral identity activates a more complex, normative interpretive frame—one attuned to values of fairness, altruism, and, crucially, authenticity (Konow, 2003; Line et al., 2018). Within this moral frame, the "win-win" proposition is not perceived as a neutral or synergistic bundle of benefits. Instead, it triggers a state of cognitive and ethical dissonance, which we conceptualize as **symbolic misalignment**, a phenomenon deeply rooted in the tourist's search for genuine connection and meaning (Colton, n.d.; Nam & Yang, 2025). Individuals strive for cognitive consistency, engaging in a bidirectional process where emerging conclusions about an offer retroactively alter the evaluation of the evidence itself (Simon et al., 2004). The introduction of a self-serving perk appears to disrupt this coherence for the morally-primed tourist, creating psychological discomfort that motivates plan modification or rejection (Nam & Yang, 2025; Simon et al., 2004).

This negative reaction can be further elucidated by examining the extensive literature on authenticity in tourism. High-EOI travelers are not merely purchasing a service; they are

often engaging in a form of identity expression, seeking what is termed *existential authenticity*—a state of being true to oneself through meaningful acts that align with one's core values (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Lehman et al., n.d.; Moore et al., 2021). For them, choosing a CBT initiative is an "authentic act" (Moore et al., 2021) that affirms their self-concept as responsible global citizens, a process central to the modern drive to verify one's identity in the eyes of others (Turner, 2011). The introduction of a personal discount corrupts this act, reframing it from a values-driven expression of support to a calculated economic transaction. This clashes directly with their motivation, which is often a search for what is termed a "hot" authentication process—one that is performative, emotionally charged, and generates a deep, spiritual sense of connection, rather than a "cool", detached appreciation of a certified product (Moore et al., 2021). The mixed incentive forces a "cool" transactional lens onto an experience they desire to be "hot" and relational. While previous research suggests authenticity is a fluid process constructed and negotiated through experience (Colton, n.d.; Moore et al., 2021), our findings indicate that certain marketing signals can be so jarringly inauthentic that they *foreclose* this negotiation process entirely, leading to immediate rejection.

From a **Signaling Theory** perspective (Connelly et al., 2025; Shahid et al., 2024), the CBT operator acts as a signaler attempting to convey the underlying quality and pro-social purpose of the CBT offering to potential tourists (receivers) in an environment of high information asymmetry (Alazaizeh et al., 2024; Connelly et al., 2011; Mavlanova et al., 2012). The mixed-incentive campaign simultaneously transmits two distinct signals: a *moral signal* of shared values and community benefit (via the PCI) and a *commercial signal* of economic self-interest (via the TIP). For the high-EOI segment, whose moral identity primes them to demand signal consistency and purity (Connelly et al., 2025; Södergren, 2021), these two signals are perceived as fundamentally contradictory. The presence of a self-serving commercial perk contaminates the integrity of the moral appeal, rendering the entire message ambiguous and severely undermining the signaler's credibility, a critical failure in markets where receivers cannot directly observe quality (Boulding & Kirmani, 1993; Zhang et al., 2025). This misalignment engenders heightened skepticism and perceptions of instrumental greenwashing, mirroring findings in volunteer tourism where seemingly altruistic messages can mask commercial operations, leading to dissatisfaction (Smith & Font, 2014). Ultimately, this leads to a rejection of the offer as exploitative or ethically compromised.

This mechanism is powerfully explained and amplified by **Motivation Crowding Theory** (Line et al., 2018). For individuals with high intrinsic motivation—a genuine, altruistic desire to support the community, characteristic of the high-EOI segment—the introduction of a salient extrinsic reward (the TIP) can paradoxically undermine or "crowd out" that intrinsic motivation (Line et al., 2018). The transactional nature of the discount reframes a potentially relational act of support into a mere commercial exchange. This aligns with goal-framing theory, where a "gain goal frame," predicated on financial outcomes, is introduced that directly opposes the "normative goal frame" that motivates individuals to act in line with their values and social expectations (Line et al., 2018). When their moral identity is active, these eco-committed travelers expect an appeal to shared values, not an appeal to their wallet. The blended message is thus interpreted not as a genuine effort to create shared value, but as a cynical marketing tactic that compromises the ethical integrity of the pro-community proposition, transforming a potential act of solidarity into a commodified experience.

5.2 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this research makes several critical contributions. First, it enriches the signaling signaling literature by demonstrating how the receiver's salient identity acts as a potent moderator in the signal decoding process (Connelly et al., 2011; Taj, 2016). The effectiveness

of a signal is not an inherent property of the signal itself but is contingent upon its alignment with the receiver's active cognitive and normative framework. We specifically show how a secondary commercial signal can function as deleterious "noise", not merely adding information but actively corrupting the primary moral signal. In a market characterized by information asymmetry and concerns about opportunism—akin to the principal-agent problems discussed in economics (Joseph & Thevaranjan, 1998; Martimort, 1996)—the tourist (agent) scrutinizes the CBT operator's (principal's) signals for any hint of hidden, self-serving motives. The TIP, in this context, becomes a powerful signal of potential opportunism, creating doubt about the unobservable commitment of the operator to its stated community mission, much like how unobservable agent choices can complicate contractual relationships and incentive design (Joseph & Thevaranjan, 1998; Martimort, 1996).

Second, we extend the application of motivation crowding theory to the tourism marketing context, providing robust empirical evidence that extrinsic incentives can be profoundly counterproductive when targeting intrinsically motivated consumers (Line et al., 2018). Our work suggests that for certain market segments, the very logic of commercial marketing—bundling value to maximize appeal—is fundamentally flawed and can destroy the very value it seeks to create. This resonates with broader critiques of utilitarian marketing approaches in sectors such as volunteer tourism, where profit-based logic can be inconsiderate of social costs and returns (Smith & Font, 2014).

Practically, the implications for CBT operators and sustainable tourism marketers are profound and demand an immediate re-evaluation of current practices. The prevailing one-size-fits-all approach of bundling incentives is dangerously fragile. Our findings advise a strategic shift from blending messages to meticulously aligning them with specific audience segments and their likely motivational states.

1. **Embrace Signal Purity and Motivational Alignment:** For morally-motivated and eco-committed travelers, marketing campaigns must lead with a pure, unadulterated pro-community message that emphasizes shared values, authentic impact, and relational connection (Södergren, 2021; Sorakunnas, 2024). Transactional perks should be scrupulously avoided in initial framing and direct calls-to-action. Conversely, for more price-sensitive or less eco-conscious segments—akin to leisure travelers who prioritize price over other attributes (Kim & Park, 2017)—a clear value proposition framed around personal benefits may be more effective. This segmentation must be deliberate and carefully executed, recognizing that different traveler mind-sets, such as maximizers versus satisficers, respond differently to trade-offs between desirability and feasibility (Li et al., 2019).
2. **Navigate the Eco-Committed Segment with Strategic Care:** This segment represents a double-edged sword. Their passion makes them powerful advocates and brand ambassadors, but their heightened sensitivity to authenticity makes them unforgiving critics of perceived moral compromises. This is analogous to the "black-sheep hypothesis," where unfavorable *ingroup* members (e.g., a CBT operator perceived as inauthentic) receive more negative evaluations than similarly flawed outgroup members (Bettencourt et al., 1997). Communication with this group must be impeccably consistent, transparent, and prioritize the moral signal above all else. They are the "canary in the coal mine" for authenticity; their negative reaction is an early warning that a brand's ethical messaging is misaligned, potentially leading to brand hate and damaging reputation effects (Yang & Mundel, 2022).

5.3 A New Horizon for Research: From Transactional Signals to Emotional Solidarity

This study, by its experimental design, focused on a single, transactional moment of communication. The observed backlash, however, points to a deeper relational dynamic that such a design cannot fully capture. The failure of the mixed-incentive signal is ultimately a failure to establish a meaningful connection; it creates psychological distance precisely where it aims to build a bridge. This limitation highlights a crucial gap in our understanding and suggests a promising new direction for future research: the cultivation of Emotional Solidarity (ES).

Emotional Solidarity refers to the affective bonds, sense of mutual identification, and perceived connectedness between tourists and host communities. It represents a paradigm shift from viewing tourists as 'customers' to be incentivized, to engaging them as potential partners in a shared project of sustainable development. The transactional communication failures we have identified suggest that building a resilient and sustainable tourist-community relationship requires fostering ES as a foundational prerequisite, not as a post-purchase outcome.

We propose that high levels of pre-existing ES could serve as a powerful relational buffer against the kind of symbolic misalignment observed in our study. A buffer mechanism operates by altering the hermeneutic framework through which a message is interpreted. A tourist with no prior connection to a community encounters a marketing message as a standalone, decontextualized transaction. They must judge the signaler's intent based solely on the signal itself, which, as we have shown, is flawed and contradictory. However, a tourist who has already developed ES through prior engagement—perhaps through immersive storytelling, following community social media, or previous visits—possesses pre-existing relational capital. When this tourist encounters the same clumsy mixed-incentive message, their interpretation is filtered through a lens of established trust and goodwill. They are more likely to attribute the symbolic misalignment to marketing naivety or commercial necessity rather than to moral corruption. The ES acts as a protective shield, allowing the receiver to forgive a poorly constructed signal because they already believe in the fundamental quality and integrity of the signaler.

This relational foundation could make CBT initiatives more resilient to the inevitable frictions of commercial communication. This leads to a new set of critical research questions that move beyond optimizing single campaigns toward understanding the long-term health of the tourist-community relationship:

- Longitudinal Dynamics: How do different incentive structures (e.g., pure pro-community vs. mixed-incentive vs. no-incentive) differentially build or erode emotional solidarity over the entire tourist journey, from pre-arrival engagement to post-trip reflection?
- The Buffering Hypothesis: Can a high level of pre-existing emotional solidarity, experimentally induced or measured, be shown to significantly attenuate or even reverse the negative backlash against symbolically misaligned marketing signals from CBT operators?
- Cultivation Strategies: What specific non-transactional communication strategies (e.g., participatory storytelling, transparent reporting of impact metrics, virtual host interactions, showcasing raw and unpolished community testimonials) are most effective at cultivating robust emotional solidarity *before* a transactional call-to-action is made, thereby creating a more durable and authentic foundation for sustainable tourism partnerships?

By shifting the research focus from optimizing transactions to cultivating relationality, the field can better address the core challenge of CBT: fostering genuine, enduring, and mutually beneficial connections between people and places.

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