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Driving Sustainable Visit Intention: The Role of Green Communication, Destination Branding, and Tourist Trust

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to analyze how green communication marketing (GCM), sustainable destination branding (SDB), and eco-tourism experience quality (EEQ) affected tourists' sustainable visit intention (SVI), considering the mediating role of tourist trust. Research justification: There is a pressing need to respond to SDG 2030 , and we have recently has seen tourist mindsets dramatically change since the pandemic in terms of accountability to ecological surroundings. Methodology: This research uses a quantitative approach with causal-mediational design. The data were collected from 347 valid respondents who had visited ecotourism destinations in Indonesia, using purposive sampling through an online questionnaire. Research findings: This study finds that: (1) GCM has a positive and significant effect on SVI; (2) SDB has a positive and significant effect on SVI; (3) EEQ has a positive and significant effect on SVI; and (4) tourist trust partially mediates the effect of all three constructs on SVI. The model shows good explanatory power for both SVI and tourist trust. Research limitations/implications: Researchers recognize that this study gives substantial insights into green marketing and tourism destinations. Practical implications: The findings suggest that tourism stakeholders should develop sustainable marketing campaigns and foster trust to promote sustainable tourism.

Keywords: Eco-Tourism Experience Quality; Green Communication Marketing; Sustainable Destination Branding; Sustainable Visit Intention; Tourist Trust

JEL Codes: L83; M31; Q56

1. Introduction

Sustainable tourism has transformed from a niche market phenomenon into a prevailing paradigm in the global tourism industry. The United Nations Environment Program (Smart Green Post, 2026; United Nations Environment Program, 2025) reports that more than 60% of international tourists in 2024 incorporated environmental sustainability considerations into their travel decision-making, up from 45% in 2019. In Indonesia, the tourism sector contributes 5.5% to national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and generated USD 17.6 billion in foreign exchange revenues in 2024 (Kemenparekraf, 2024), with nature-based and sustainability-oriented

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ecotourism emerging as the sector's fastest-growing segment (Luong, 2024a).

Despite this transformation, a critical challenge persists: the widening gap between tourists' increasingly favorable pro-environmental attitudes and their actual sustainable travel behavior, a phenomenon widely recognized as the value-action gap or attitude-behavior gap (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2022; Paulino & Prats, 2024). Recent evidence indicates that although 78% of tourists profess environmental concern, only 34% consistently choose green destinations or tourism services in practice (UNWTO, 2024; Yang & Zhang, 2022). A key factor in bridging this gap is tourist trust in destination sustainability claims, which is often undermined by widespread skepticism about greenwashing across the global tourism industry (Bae & Chang, 2021).

Within Indonesian ecotourism destinations, three key marketing constructs green communication marketing, sustainable destination branding, and eco-tourism experience quality are recognized as important yet remain underexplored in the literature (Riharjo et al., 2025; Li et al., 2026; Usman et al., 2025; Yi & Hui-Min, 2020). Within Indonesian ecotourism destinations, three key marketing constructs green communication marketing, sustainable destination branding, and eco-tourism experience quality are recognized as important yet remain underexplored in the literature (Akram et al., 2024; Saidon et al., 2024); (2) their impact on tourist trust (Kumar & Walia, 2025); (3) the effect of tourist trust on visit intention (Liu et al., 2023); and (4) whether tourist trust mediates the relationships between these three constructs and sustainable visit intention within the Indonesian ecotourism context.

The literature on sustainable tourism has grown significantly, but a review reveals clear gaps. Most studies on what leads to sustainable visits just pick one marketing factor at a time, not the whole picture. For example, Correia et al. (2023) focused only on green communication. Stylidis et al. (2021) focused on branding. And (Luong, 2024a)was all about experience quality. It's actually quite frustrating because nothing brings GCM, SDB, and EEQ together in one model. That part gets a bit messy to explain, but it feels like a real opportunity missed.

Second, the mediating role of tourist trust between sustainability marketing factors and visit intention remains largely unexplored within the ecotourism literature. While Quan et al., (2022) examined trust mediation in the context of green tourism, that study was conducted in the South Korean market with different marketing variables and did not address SDB or EEQ constructs, leaving a crucial gap given that trust operates as a highly context-sensitive psychological mechanism shaped by cultural, institutional, and historical experiences with sustainability claims.

Third, nearly all relevant prior research has been conducted in developed economies, particularly Western Europe, North America, and East Asian countries such as South Korea, Japan, and China, whose tourist profiles, sustainability infrastructure, and institutional trust levels differ substantially from Indonesia. Indonesia's ecotourism destinations, including Komodo National Park, Raja Ampat, and Lake Toba, present distinctive characteristics in terms of biodiversity richness, multi-stakeholder governance complexities, and tourist trust dynamics that have not yet been systematically examined within an integrative framework.

Fourth, prior research has inadequately addressed the value-action gap phenomenon in the post-pandemic and SDG 2030 era, during which sustainable tourism motivations and behaviors have changed significantly. The psychological mechanisms that explain this shift, particularly through the trust construct, remain insufficiently understood.

To address these gaps, this study offers four distinct contributions. First, in terms of model

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novelty, this research introduces and empirically tests an integrative model combining three sustainability marketing constructs, GCM, SDB, and EEQ within a single causal-mediational framework grounded in the simultaneous integration of Signaling Theory, Value-Belief-Norm Theory, and Trust-Commitment Theory. This three-theory integration has not been previously attempted in empirical sustainable tourism research. Second, regarding mediation novelty, this study explicitly positions tourist trust as a simultaneous mediator across all three marketing constructs and their effects on SVI, employing the Variance Accounted For (VAF) method, a more rigorous approach than the Sobel test widely applied in earlier research. Third, in terms of contextual novelty, this study addresses a significant empirical void by positioning Indonesian ecotourism destinations as the research locus within the post-pandemic and SDG 2030 context, a setting that is both internationally underrepresented and characterized by distinctive sustainability dynamics. Fourth, regarding methodological novelty, the use of 5,000-subsample bootstrapping and HTMT-based discriminant validity assessment represents cutting-edge methodological practice not yet widely applied in Indonesian sustainable tourism research.

2. Literature Review

This study is anchored in three complementary theoretical frameworks. First, Signaling Theory (Charter & Polonsky, 2023) explains how green marketing communications and sustainable branding function as credible signals of a destination's genuine commitment to sustainability, thereby influencing tourist trust and decision-making (Font & McCabe, 2020). Second, Value-Belief-Norm Theory (Usman et al., 2025) elucidates the formation of pro-environmental behavior through a hierarchical structure of tourist values, beliefs, and personal norms. Third, Trust-Commitment Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) affirms the pivotal role of trust in cultivating long-term consumer commitment here applied to tourists' sustained commitment to selecting and revisiting sustainable destinations.

Green communication marketing (GCM) is defined as a marketing communication strategy that explicitly integrates sustainability messages, values, and environmental claims to shape consumers' pro-environmental perceptions and behaviors (Correia et al., 2023). Within the tourism ecosystem, GCM encompasses digital sustainability content, transparent reporting of environmental impact, and authentic ecological awareness campaigns. Molinillo et al., (2018) demonstrated that the quality and credibility of green communication content significantly predict tourist trust formation and behavioral intentions, with particularly strong effects among millennial and Gen-Z tourists who exhibit higher environmental literacy (Alam et al., 2022; Aramita et al., 2025). A recent meta-analysis by Huang et al., (2025) further corroborates the positive relationship between GCM and tourist trust, mediated through pathways of perceived authenticity and information credibility.

H1: Green Communication Marketing has a positive and significant effect on Sustainable Visit Intention.

H4: Green Communication Marketing has a positive and significant effect on Tourist Trust.

Sustainable destination branding (SDB) refers to the strategic process of constructing and communicating a destination brand identity that authentically reflects commitment to environmental, social, and economic sustainability (Aman et al., 2024; Stylidis et al., 2021; Tran & Rudolf, 2022). Unlike conventional fdestination branding focused on physical attributes, SDB integrates sustainability values as a primary brand differentiator. (Basendwah et al., 2024; Sohaib et al., 2020) established that destinations with robust sustainable branding consistently demonstrate higher levels of tourist trust and revisit loyalty (Abbasi et al., 2024).

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In the Indonesian context, the potential for SDB is considerable, given the country's exceptional natural and cultural heritage yet it remains contingent on more systematic and standardized brand management practices.

H2: Sustainable Destination Branding has a positive and significant effect on Sustainable Visit Intention.

H5: Sustainable Destination Branding has a positive and significant effect on Tourist Trust.

Eco-tourism experience quality (EEQ) is a multidimensional construct that captures the excellence of tourists' experiences within nature-based and sustainability-oriented settings, encompassing quality of nature interaction, cultural authenticity, guide professionalism, and eco-friendly facility standards (Carvache-Franco et al., 2020; Luong, 2024a). Distinct from conventional service quality frameworks such as SERVQUAL, EEQ integrates the transformative and educational dimensions that characterize genuine ecotourism experiences. (Chan & Saikim, 2022; Olivar et al., 2023; Quan et al., 2022) found that EEQ significantly influences tourist trust through the confirmation of sustainability-based expectations, while (Dolnicar et al., 2021) established a direct link between EEQ and revisit intentions along with responsible tourism behavior.

H3: Eco-Tourism Experience Quality has a positive and significant effect on Sustainable Visit Intention.

H6: Eco-Tourism Experience Quality has a positive and significant effect on Tourist Trust.

In the context of sustainable tourism, tourist trust is conceptualized as tourists' belief in a destination's reliability, integrity, and competence in fulfilling its sustainability commitments (Gefen et al., 2020; Naparin, 2025). This construct encompasses three dimensions: cognitive trust (rational calculation-based trust), affective trust (emotion- and experience-based trust), and conative trust (commitment-oriented trust). (Quan et al., 2022) empirically confirmed the mediating role of tourist trust in a green tourism context, finding that trust mediates between 30% and 40% of the influence of marketing factors on sustainable behavioral intentions, a finding particularly relevant to the Indonesian ecotourism context, where institutional credibility regarding environmental claims may face heightened tourist skepticism.

H7: Tourist Trust has a positive and significant effect on Sustainable Visit Intention.

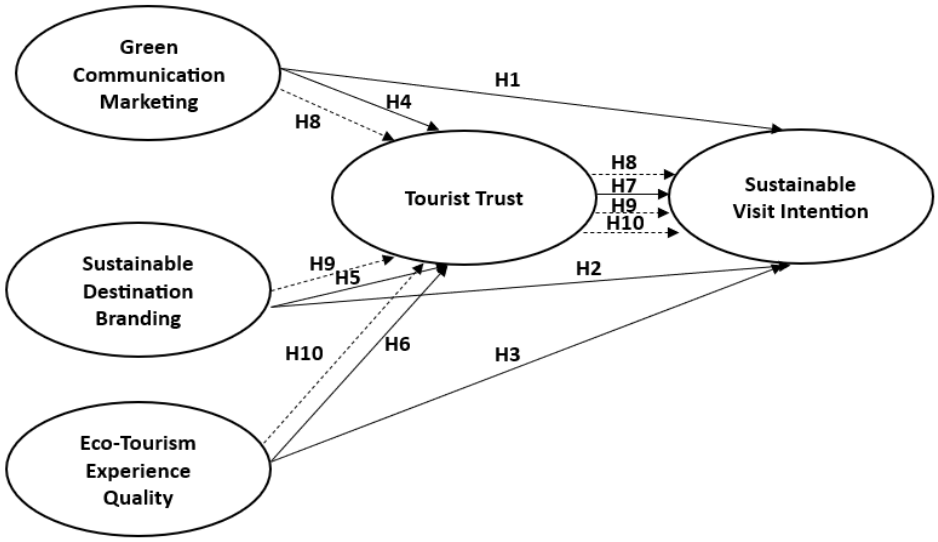
H8–H10: Tourist Trust mediates the effects of GCM, SDB, and EEQ on Sustainable Visit Intention.

3. Research Method

This study employed a quantitative approach with a causal-mediational research design. The analysis used a variance-based structural equation modeling approach, chosen for three primary reasons: (1) its capacity to handle latent constructs within complex models incorporating mediation variables; (2) its independence from the assumption of multivariate normality; and (3) its suitability for predictive and theoretical relationship exploration purposes (Hair et al., 2020). A bootstrapping procedure involving 5,000 subsamples was applied to assess the statistical significance of direct and indirect (mediation) effects.

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Fig.1: Conceptual Framework



Source: processed by the authors

The study population comprised domestic and international tourists who had visited at least one accredited ecotourism destination in Indonesia within the preceding 12 months. Purposive sampling was employed with the following inclusion criteria: (1) aged 17 years or above; (2) having visited at least one accredited ecotourism destination in Indonesia; (3) possessing knowledge of the sustainable tourism concept; and (4) willing to complete the questionnaire in full. Respondents were recruited online because tourists who have visited ecotourism destinations in Indonesia, most frequently Komodo National Park, Lake Toba, Raja Ampat, and Ijen Crater, are geographically dispersed and no complete sampling frame of such visitors exists. We created a self-administered questionnaire in Google Forms and distributed it from January to March 2026 through social media platforms, travel and nature-community groups, and messaging groups used by tourists who had visited these destinations. The first section of the questionnaire included screening questions on the four inclusion criteria, and respondents who did not meet them could not continue. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and respondents gave informed consent before completing the questionnaire. We determined the required sample size in two steps. First, the minimum sample size was established using widely used guidelines for variance-based structural equation modeling: (a) the 10-times rule, under which the sample should be at least ten times the largest number of structural paths directed at any construct (four paths point at SVI, giving a minimum of 40); and (b) the inverse square root method (Kock & Hadaya, 2018), which, for a minimum path coefficient of 0.11–0.20 at 5% significance and 80% power, requires at least 155 respondents. Second, because larger samples improve the stability of parameter estimates, we adopted a more conservative target of at least 300 valid responses, in line with best-practice recommendations. A total of 412 questionnaires were distributed to allow for incomplete or ineligible responses; after screening, 347 valid responses were retained (response rate: 84.2%), which exceeds all of the minimum thresholds above. The research instrument was developed by adapting psychometrically validated scales from prior literature. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree). Table 1 presents the complete variable operationalization.

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Table 1. Research Variable Operationalization

Variable	Code	Indicator	Source
Green Communication Marketing (X1)	GCM1	Environmentally friendly marketing messages	(Chen et al., 2021)
	GCM2	Transparency of sustainability information	
	GCM3	Digital environmental awareness campaigns	
Sustainable Destination Branding (X2)	SDB1	Sustainable destination brand image	(Stylidis et al., 2021)
	SDB2	Unique identity of the green destination	
	SDB3	Brand association with nature & local culture	
Eco-Tourism Experience Quality (X3)	EEQ1	Quality of authentic natural attractions	(Luong, 2024b)
	EEQ2	Meaningful local cultural interaction	
	EEQ3	Sustainable tourism facilities	
Tourist Trust (Z)	TT1	Trust in sustainability claims	Gefen et al. (2020)
	TT2	Confidence in destination commitment	
	TT3	Safety and reliability of green destinations	
Sustainable Visit Intention (Y)	SVI1	Intention to visit eco-friendly destinations	(Han et al., 2021)
	SVI2	Willingness to pay more for green tourism	
	SVI3	Recommendation of sustainable destinations	

Source: Adapted from (Chen et al., 2021), *(Stylidis et al., 2021), (Luong, 2024b), Gefen et al. (2020), and* (Han et al., 2021).

4. Findings and Discussions

Among the 347 valid respondents, the majority identified as female (56.8%), were aged 22–35

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years (63.4%), held a bachelor's degree (62.5%), and were employed in the private sector (38.3%) or were university students (27.7%). Domestic tourists constituted 79.3% of the sample, with the most frequently visited ecotourism destinations being Komodo National Park (22.8%), Lake Toba (18.7%), Raja Ampat (16.4%), and Ijen Crater (12.1%). Notably, 72.6% of respondents reported actively considering environmental impact when selecting tourism destinations. Table 2 presents the full respondent profile.

Table 2. Respondent Profile

Category	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	197	56.8%
	Male	150	43.2%
Age	22–35 years	220	63.4%
	17–21 years	62	17.9%
	36–50 years	65	18.7%
Education	Bachelor's degree	217	62.5%
	Diploma	76	21.9%
	Postgraduate	54	15.6%
Occupation	Private employee	133	38.3%
	Student	96	27.7%
	Government employee	56	16.1%
	Other	62	17.9%
Tourist type	Domestic	275	79.3%
	International	72	20.7%
Top destinations visited	Komodo National Park	79	22.8%
	Lake Toba	65	18.7%
	Raja Ampat	57	16.4%
	Ijen Crater	42	12.1%

Source: Primary data (2026), n = 347

The outer measurement model was evaluated through assessments of convergent validity, discriminant validity, and construct reliability. All Cronbach's Alpha values exceeded 0.70, Composite Reliability (CR) exceeded 0.80, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) surpassed 0.50, satisfying the thresholds established by Hair et al. (2020). Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) criterion, with all values falling below 0.85, confirming that each construct is empirically distinct. Table 3 summarizes the measurement model evaluation results.

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Table 3. Reliability and Construct Validity Test Results

Variable	Cronbach α	CR	AVE	Remarks
Green Communication Marketing (X1)	0.871	0.911	0.674	Valid & Reliable
Sustainable Destination Branding (X2)	0.858	0.903	0.658	Valid & Reliable
Eco-Tourism Experience Quality (X3)	0.883	0.923	0.698	Valid & Reliable
Tourist Trust (Z)	0.892	0.929	0.714	Valid & Reliable
Sustainable Visit Intention (Y)	0.876	0.916	0.685	Valid & Reliable

Source: Primary data processed (2026).

The structural model demonstrated strong predictive capability, with $R^2 = 0.712$ for sustainable visit intention (Y) and $R^2 = 0.634$ for tourist trust (Z), both classified as substantial according to Cohen, (2013) benchmarks. Predictive relevance (Q^2) values exceeded zero for all endogenous constructs, confirming the model's predictive relevance. Tables 4 and 5 report the complete hypothesis testing results and mediation analysis, respectively.

Table 4. Hypothesis Testing Results (Path Coefficients)

H	Hypothesized Path	β	t-stat	p-value	Decision
H1	GCM (X1) → Sustainable Visit Intention (Y)	0.318	3.847	0.000	Supported
H2	SDB (X2) → Sustainable Visit Intention (Y)	0.274	3.421	0.001	Supported
H3	EEQ (X3) → Sustainable Visit Intention (Y)	0.301	3.612	0.000	Supported
H4	GCM (X1) → Tourist Trust (Z)	0.389	4.503	0.000	Supported
H5	SDB (X2) → Tourist Trust (Z)	0.342	4.114	0.000	Supported
H6	EEQ (X3) → Tourist Trust (Z)	0.365	4.287	0.000	Supported
H7	Tourist Trust (Z) → Sustainable Visit Intention (Y)	0.412	5.134	0.000	Supported
H8	GCM → Z → SVI (Partial Mediation)	0.160	3.208	0.001	Supported
H9	SDB → Z → SVI (Partial Mediation)	0.141	2.976	0.003	Supported
H10	EEQ → Z → SVI (Partial Mediation)	0.150	3.102	0.002	Supported

*Source: Primary data (2026). *Significant at $p < 0.05$; **Significant at $p < 0.01$*

Table 5. Mediation Effect Analysis (VAF)

Path	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect	VAF (%)	Mediation Type
GCM (X1) → Z → Y	0.318	0.160	0.478	33.47%	Partial
SDB (X2) → Z → Y	0.274	0.141	0.415	33.98%	Partial
EEQ (X3) → Z → Y	0.301	0.150	0.451	33.26%	Partial

Source: Primary data (2026). Partial mediation: 20% < VAF < 80%

The first finding confirms H1, demonstrating that green communication marketing exerts a positive and significant influence on sustainable visit intention ($\beta = 0.318$; $t = 3.847$; $p < 0.01$). This result aligns with the work of Correia et al., (2023), who identified transparency and

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credibility in green communications as significant predictors of pro-environmental tourism behavior (Le et al., 2025; Molinillo et al., 2018). Within the Indonesian ecotourism context, marketing content that authentically conveys a destination's commitment to nature conservation, local community empowerment, and carbon footprint reduction proves substantially more effective in shaping visit intention than conventional marketing communications focused primarily on aesthetic appeal (Inmor et al., 2025).

The second finding (H2: $\beta = 0.274$; $t = 3.421$) and third finding (H3: $\beta = 0.301$; $t = 3.612$) confirm the positive effects of SDB and EEQ on sustainable visit intention, respectively (Phung & Nguyen, 2023). Notably, EEQ yields a larger path coefficient than SDB, suggesting that actual on-site experiences exert greater influence on revisit intention formation than destination brand perceptions built through marketing communications. This finding resonates with Pine & Gilmore, (2013) experience economy argument, which retains particular relevance in contemporary sustainable tourism, where authentic experiential quality serves as a primary differentiator (Baydeniz et al., 2024).

The most theoretically significant finding of this study is the confirmation of tourist trust as a partial mediator (H8–H10), with VAF values consistently ranging between 33% and 34% across all three mediation pathways (Nawaz et al., 2025; Thang, 2025; Yasin, 2026). Partial mediation indicates that tourist trust constitutes an important yet not exclusive psychological mechanism linking sustainability marketing factors to visit intention (Baloch et al., 2023). This finding carries substantial theoretical implications: comprehensive models of sustainable tourism marketing must incorporate trust as a critical mediating construct alongside direct effect pathways (Batabyal, 2016). In the Indonesian context, where public skepticism toward corporate and institutional environmental claims remains elevated due to documented greenwashing exposure, strategic investments in trust-building through independent sustainability certification, transparent environmental impact reporting, and documented community engagement are particularly warranted. Consistent with (AlMahmoud, 2020), who found trust mediating 30–40% of marketing factors' influence on sustainable behavioral intentions in East Asian contexts, the present study extends this evidence to the Southeast Asian ecotourism market with a different combination of predictor constructs.

Taken together, the confirmation of all ten hypotheses at $p < 0.01$, combined with the model's substantial predictive power ($R^2 = 0.712$ for SVI), suggests a high degree of robustness and internal consistency in the proposed integrated model. These findings collectively reinforce Signaling Theory's proposition that credible sustainability signals reduce information asymmetry and build tourist trust, which in turn translates into sustainable behavioral commitments (Font & McCabe, 2020).

5. Conclusion

This study empirically demonstrates that green communication marketing, sustainable destination branding, and eco-tourism experience quality each exert positive and significant effects on tourists' sustainable visit intention, both directly and through the partial mediation of tourist trust. All ten hypotheses were supported at $p < 0.01$, with the model achieving a substantial predictive capacity of $R^2 = 0.712$. Tourist trust consistently functions as a partial mediator with VAF values of 33–34% across all three mediation pathways.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study advances sustainable tourism theory by introducing and validating the first integrative model that simultaneously incorporates GCM, SDB, and EEQ within a trust-mediated causal framework grounded in Signaling Theory, Value-Belief-

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Norm Theory, and Trust-Commitment Theory. The contextual novelty of applying this model to Indonesian ecotourism within the SDG 2030 post-pandemic context contributes meaningfully to the underrepresented Southeast Asian literature.

For sustainable tourism stakeholders in Indonesia, including the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, managers of National Strategic Tourism Areas (KSPN), and ecotourism operators, three strategic imperatives emerge. First, investment in transparent, independently verified green communication programs delivered through relevant digital channels (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) demonstrably strengthens visit intention. Second, national sustainable tourism masterplans must prioritize developing destination brand identities that authentically embed sustainability values rather than resort to performative greenwashing. Third, given the significant mediating role of trust, credible national ecotourism certification programs that are widely communicated to tourists warrant urgent expansion and strengthened institutional backing.

This study acknowledges several limitations that simultaneously define a future research agenda. The cross-sectional design constrains causal temporal inference; longitudinal research is required to track trust and visit intention dynamics over time. The sample's domestic tourist majority limits generalizability to international tourist segments with potentially distinct eco-consciousness profiles. Future studies are encouraged to: (1) integrate moderating variables such as environmental consciousness and digital literacy; (2) adopt comparative cross-country ASEAN designs; and (3) explore AI-based eco-marketing as an emerging construct within the context of Industry 5.0.

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