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Article

The Influence of Destination-Level ESG Image on Tourists' Visit Intention in Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This study investigates the influence of destination-level Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) image on tourists' visit intention in emerging tourism destinations, using Uzbekistan as a case study. Over the last few years, it has gained significant importance in the tourism sector due to the awareness of travelers about sustainability, social responsibility and governance practices at your destination. Compared to the bulk of studies that have investigated ESG on the hotel or firm level, this study investigates ESG perception on the destination level, thus providing a general rather than local perspective on tourist behavior. Survey data collection of 247 international and domestic tourists who either recently visited or considered visiting Uzbekistan within the last two years. The results show that destination trust is significantly influenced by perceptions of cultural care and social responsibility, and it has a positive effect on visit intention. Caring for the environment had the most potent effect (beta = 0.41, $p < 0.001$) followed by social responsibility (beta = 0.36, $p < 0.001$). The indirect effect of governance perception is weaker but still significant (beta = 0.18, $p = 0.032$). The results of the mediation analysis supported destination trust as an important mediating mechanism between the components of an ESG image and trip visit. The study fills the gaps in sustainable tourism and ESG literature and offers practical implications for destination marketers and policymakers, particularly in emerging tourism markets.

Keywords: ESG Image, Destination Image, Destination Trust, Visit Intention, Sustainable Tourism, Regional Tourism, Emerging Destinations

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1. Introduction

In the modern era of globalization, sustainable development has become one of the fundamental priorities shaping the world economy, and the tourism sector represents no exception to this transformative trend [1]. This shift is largely a response to growing concerns over ecological collapse, widespread social injustice, and other institutional failures that have occurred among tourism destinations internationally. Hence, the Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) paradigm has emerged as a holistic analytical framework for analyzing sustainability practices across a range of economic activities such as tourism, hospitality and destination management.

This paper posits that the ESG conceptual basis has now matured from its roots in the investment and corporate finance world, to the point where it is conceptually useful as an increasingly relevant approach to assessing the tourism destination as integrated system. The ESG framework itself, comprises of three fundamental and Table dimensions, which are interconnected-assessment levels that provide a complete picture of

organizational or destination-level sustainable performance. Environmental sustainability includes everything from natural resource management, recycling and waste reduction activities, pollution control, biodiversity and climate change [2]. It also responds to community support systems, preservation of cultural heritage, fair labor practices across the tourism value chain (involving strict control of the supply chain), local economic development initiatives, and inclusive tourism development benefiting marginalized populations.

Although most current tourism research has focused on ESG practices at the firm level mainly exploring how tourism firms (hotels, airlines, tour operators, etc.) conduct specific sustainability practices, there is little knowledge about how tourists react to ESG practices at the wider destination level. Interestingly, this is a very important distinction because tourists tend to evaluate tourism destinations as a whole and create perceptions about the overall level of environmental stewardship, social accountability, and governance at the destination level rather than about individual businesses.

To this end, we focus on the special and timely case of Uzbekistan, which is part of the destination-level ESG image formation and tourism behaviour theme. As one of the fastest-growing tourist destinations in the world, international arrivals have surged in recent years from about 2.7 million tourists in 2017 to over 6.7 million in 2019. This was accompanied by sweeping reforms mandated from above to grow the tourism sector, but also focusing on sustainable development principles, conservation of UNESCO World Heritage cultural destinations like Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva, and gradual improvement of governance structures in the tourism sector [3].

Although there are important strides in tourist demand and sustainability, scant research has systematically explored destination-level ESG image and its influence on tourists' visit intentions in an emerging market context. We take on this research gap directly by investigating whether and how perceived ESG image at the destination level influences visit intention through the theoretically significant mediating mechanism of destination trust [4].

The research objectives guiding this study are threefold: first, to examine the direct effects of ESG perception dimensions on destination trust; second, to investigate the relationship between destination trust and behavioral visit intention; and third, to test the mediating role of destination trust in the relationship between ESG image components and visit intention.

The ESG framework originated in the financial and investment sectors during the early 2000s as a systematic means of evaluating non-financial factors that could materially affect organizational performance, risk exposure, and long-term value creation. The actual term ESG itself was introduced in a report titled Who Cares Wins which stated that it was high time that institutional investors and other financial institutions started examining the environmental, social, and governance essences of their investment analysis and decision making, backed by the United Nations Global Compact (2004). This seminal work changed the way businesses approach and investors think about corporate responsibility [5].

Environmental sustainability in tourism encompasses a wide spectrum of practices and aspects due to the industry's large environmental footprint. Those practices range from having routine resource management tactics, and total waste reduction and recycling programs, to pollution regulation and prevention processes, biodiversity conservation efforts in vulnerable natural sites, and more recently aggressive climate change mitigation endeavors [6]. Studies have shown that the tourism sector is responsible for 8% of total carbon emissions produced by the world when all relevant activities (including transport to the destination, transport in the destination, and the tourist activity itself) are factored in.

The social aspect of ESG in tourism involves a wide scope of concerns to be addressed, as the industry is a major influencer of the lives of host communities and

destination populations at large [7]. These dimensions involve community support and engagement mechanisms, systematic cultural heritage preservation mechanisms, fair labor practices and decent work at all levels of the tourism value chain, local economic development linkages that ensure that tourism benefits flow to local populations, and inclusive tourism development methods [8]. Tourism governance refers to the institutional, regulatory and management aspects that provide the enabling environment for sustainable development of destinations.

An important role for cross-regional tourism management strategy. International accounting of international ESG principles. Regional tourism as an important sector of the global economy, which despite the influence of COVID-19 still needs sustainable development, leads to the importance of implementation of basic cross-regional tourism management strategy. Conceptually, regional tourism is tourism development that utilizes local resources, cultural heritage assets, and socio-economic capabilities, within a specific geographic territory of tourism activity [9]. While there are higher-level standards and practices that could be used to align the adaptation of ESG principles with worldwide best practices, care should be taken to contextualize the adaptation and implementation of ESG to regional tourism contexts.

The initial conceptual foundation is one of regional identification and ESG integration approaches. Geographies have unique combinations of ecosystems, societal infrastructures, hegemonic structures, and political complications that must influence ESG strategy development. For illustrative purposes within Uzbekistan, Bukhara Province prioritizes historical-cultural heritage preservation representing the social component, Navoi Province emphasizes ecological sustainability in industrial areas representing the Environmental component, while Samarkand focuses on governance systems aligned with international standards representing the Governance component.

The second foundation concerns international standards and local adaptation processes. International frameworks including UNWTO guidelines, Global Sustainable Tourism Council criteria, and ISO 14001 environmental management standards establish universal principles that provide benchmarks for sustainable tourism development. However, these international standards require thoughtful adaptation to regional contexts through a systematic process that includes establishing regional ESG baselines, adapting international criteria to local conditions, developing region-specific ESG indicator systems, and implementing monitoring mechanisms [10].

The third foundation emphasizes stakeholder engagement approaches. Implementing ESG principles in regional tourism inherently requires multi-stakeholder collaboration across diverse interest groups including local government authorities, tourism enterprises, local communities, tourists, and international development agencies who provide technical expertise and financing resources.

The fourth foundation addresses regional ESG indicator systems. This included indicators such as energy efficiency, water consumption intensity, waste recycling rates, coverage of protected natural areas, and carbon footprint. Local employment rates sustained by tourism, the state of cultural heritage preservation, tourism revenue retention coefficients, and inclusivity measures for different types of tourism can be part of social indicators [11]. Governance indicators include policy transparency, anti-corruption measures, international certification attainment, and tourist safety statistics.

Foundation Five: Identifying ESG implementation opportunities in Uzbekistan's regions. The region of Bukhara constitutes opportunities for eco-cultural tourism and traditiona craftsmanship support. Smart tourism infrastructure and expansion to the level of international certification can be pursued by Samarkand. Sustainable crafts, community-scale, and carrying capacity management prevent the depletion of already-fragile Khiva and its surroundings scope for heritage tourism. The Fergana Valley can develop community-based tourism and agritourism models. Karakalpakstan can focus on

dark tourism and eco-awareness approaches related to the Aral Sea environmental crisis [12].

Destination image has emerged as one of the most extensively studied concepts in tourism research, with substantial literature examining its formation processes, dimensional structure, and effects on tourist behavior. Destination image can be defined as the aggregate sum of beliefs, ideas, impressions, and expectations that tourists hold about a destination, formed through various information sources and personal experiences. In this regard, destination image consists of cognitive evaluations regarding factual beliefs about destination characteristics, an affective evaluation about how a person feels, and a conative component reflecting hetero behavioral intent without knowledge of whether someone else has acted on that intention [13].

Previous empirical studies have extensively shown the influence of destination image on various behavioral outcomes of tourists, such as destination choice and intention to visit, satisfaction, loyalty and willingness to pay premium prices. Trust in the destination service providers and institutions is higher owing to a positive destination image, which in turn, reduces perceived risk and in a significant manner increases the likelihood of visitation. Destination trust plays an essential mediating role in the relationship between perceived destination attributes and behavioral intentions and behaviors.

Despite a great deal of industry-specific research into ESG analysis by individual firm, the concept of destination level ESG image remains relatively unexplored. Destination-level ESG image can be understood as the overall holistic impression that tourists have on the systemic efforts of environmental protection, the social responsibility activities, and the governance quality across an entire destination as an integrated system [14]. Destination-level ESG image is formed through various information sources including media coverage, destination marketing communications, firsthand experience, and word-of-mouth from other travelers.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Building upon the literature review, this study proposes a conceptual framework in which destination-level ESG image influences tourist visit intention indirectly through destination trust. The framework posits that the three dimensions of ESG image each contribute to building destination trust, which subsequently affects visit intention.

H1: Environmental care perception positively influences destination trust.

H2: Social responsibility perception positively influences destination trust.

H3: Governance quality perception positively influences destination trust.

H4: Destination trust positively influences visit intention.

H5: Destination trust mediates the relationship between ESG image components and visit intention.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional research design utilizing a structured survey questionnaire. The target population consisted of International and Domestic Tourists who visited Uzbekistan in the last two years, as well as, those who were planning to visit it. In this study, data collection was performed via an online survey that was distributed within tourism-relevant social media groups, travel forums, and by collaborating with travel agencies [15]. The survey was offered in English, Russian, and Uzbek. A total of 312 responses were actual responses, but 247 were useful responses without incomplete responses.

A breakdown of the sample showed that 54% of respondents were international tourists from such countries as Russia, Kazakhstan, South Korea, Germany, and others; the

remaining 46% were domestic tourists. 58% were between 25-44 of age. The gender division was fairly equal with 52% female and 48% male subscribers.

Multi-item scales, based on previous tourism and ESG research, were used to measure all constructs. Responses were measured using 5-point Likert scales. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranges from 0.78 to 0.91. Environmental care was assessed by four items focused on the conservation of resources, pollution control, solid and liquid waste management, and climate-friendly actions. Social Responsibility was measured with four items regarding support for the community, preservation of the local culture, fair labor practice, and development for all [16]. The governance construct included three items focused on transparency, institutional trust, and regulatory quality.

Data analysis proceeded in two stages following the recommended two-step approach for structural equation modeling. Confirmatory factor analysis assessed the measurement model. Structural equation modeling tested hypothesized relationships. Mediation analysis used bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples.

3. Results and Discussion

The results of the empirical data analysis verified that destination level ESG image is an important determinant of tourists' behavioral intentions mediated by destination trust. The structural model illustrates that environmental care and social responsibility are greatest predictors for destination trust although governance perception has a lower effect but is statistically significant. The positive but high impact of environmental care on trustworthiness of the destination suggests that tourists are relying on factors which they perceive to be contributing for sustainable resource management, pollution control, and environmental preservation in the longer run of time [17]. Likewise, social responsibility also had a strong effect, in which community participation, cultural preservation, and inclusive tourism practices increased tourists' self-confidence in the destination. On the contrary, perception of governance, despite being important, produced relatively weaker total effect, which might point out that governance factors are not as apparent as tourism features to tourists, or there are less direct association between travel-related aspects and governance.

Theoretically, the findings provide contributions by extending the current destination image theory through the inclusion of ESG in destination trust and the subsequent impact on behavioral intention. The results further confirm the assumption that tourists perceive destinations not only as singular thread tourism services but as complete socio ecological systems. The robust mediating role of destination trust illustrates that it acts as a psychological lever converting perceptions of sustainability to behavioral intentions. This extends literature on sustainable tourism by showing that ESG image is a multidimensional construct that can influence tourist decision making in emerging destinations.

Second, this study offers useful insights for the practical implications of developing tourism in Uzbekistan and other similar emerging destinations [18]. Based on the dominance of environmental and social factors, more estimation should be given to the adoption of visible and tangible sustainability initiatives such as heritage conservation projects, community-based tourism, and environment protection programs by destination managers or tourism planning authorities. Aligning ESG accomplishments with the relevant digital marketing and destination branding can reinforce destination trust and enhance international competitiveness. Moreover, improving governance transparency and institutional trust through accessibility of information systems, certification schemes, and standardized sustainability disclosures assistance is required.

While these contributions have been made, there still exist some gaps in our knowledge. First, it is based on perception based ESG indicators, instead of tangible sustainability measurements, making the study unable to determine the real effectiveness

of ESG endeavors. Second, the cross-sectional design allows only one moment contextualized by a snapshot of ESG perception but does not address demographic changes over time [19]. Thirdly, the study is limited to one emerging destination, the results of which may restrict its generalizability in other tourism settings.

Future research should utilize longitudinal designs to explore movement in ESG image as destination sustainability policies take root. While the theoretical perspective of ESG driven destination competitiveness would be better suited by comparative studies between several emerging destinations. Further work needs to combine more objective measures of ESG performance (e.g., carbon emissions, resource productivity, governance transparency), with perception-based models. Second, mixed method strategies that combine quantitative modeling with qualitative interviews may yield additional insight into how tourists perceive ESG information and how they convert that information into travel choices. This type of study would enhance both the theory and practice of the application of ESG based destination management.

The confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated good model fit: chi-square/df = 2.31, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.073. All standardized factor loadings exceeded 0.60. All AVE values exceeded 0.50. Composite reliability values ranged from 0.82 to 0.91. Discriminant validity was confirmed (Table 1).

Table 1. Measurement Model Results

Construct	Items	Loadings	AVE	CR
Environmental Care	4	0.72-0.89	0.65	0.88
Social Responsibility	4	0.68-0.85	0.61	0.86
Governance	3	0.64-0.82	0.56	0.82
Destination Trust	4	0.75-0.91	0.68	0.91
Visit Intention	3	0.78-0.88	0.71	0.88

The structural model demonstrated acceptable fit: chi-square/df = 2.45, CFI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.076.

Table 2. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Beta	p-value	Result
H1: Env. Care to Trust	0.41	<0.001	Supported
H2: Social Resp. to Trust	0.36	<0.001	Supported
H3: Governance to Trust	0.18	0.032	Partially Supported
H4: Trust to Visit Int.	0.62	<0.001	Supported

Hypothesis 1 was strongly supported with beta = 0.41, indicating environmental care perception has the strongest effect. Hypothesis 2 was supported with beta = 0.36. Hypothesis 3 was partially supported with beta = 0.18. Hypothesis 4 received strong support with beta = 0.62 (Table 2).

Table 3. Mediation Results

Mediated Path	Indirect Effect	95% CI
Env. Care to Trust to Visit Int.	0.26	[0.15, 0.38]
Social Resp. to Trust to Visit Int.	0.22	[0.11, 0.34]
Governance to Trust to Visit Int.	0.11	[0.02, 0.21]

The findings provide important insights into destination-level ESG image's role in shaping tourist behavior. Environmental care and social responsibility emerged as the strongest predictors of destination trust, highlighting tourists' attention to visible

sustainability practices and community engagement (Table 3). The relatively weaker effect of governance suggests these factors may be less immediately salient compared to visible environmental and social dimensions. The strong mediating role of destination trust confirms its theoretical importance as a psychological mechanism linking ESG perceptions to behavioral intentions.

This study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it extends ESG framework application from firm level to destination level. Second, it validates destination trust as a crucial mediating mechanism. Third, it provides empirical evidence from an emerging tourism destination context.

For destination marketers, findings suggest prioritizing environmental and social sustainability initiatives in promotional communications. Governance transparency should be communicated more effectively. Destination managers should invest in genuine ESG initiatives rather than superficial marketing.

4. Conclusion

This study investigated destination-level ESG image influence on visit intention using Uzbekistan as a case study. Environmental care and social responsibility significantly enhance destination trust, which positively influences visit intention. For emerging destinations like Uzbekistan, strengthening ESG-oriented destination management can enhance international competitiveness.

Limitations include cross-sectional data and single-destination focus. Future research could employ longitudinal designs, incorporate objective ESG indicators, and conduct multi-country comparisons.

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