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Integrating ESG Perceptions and the Technology Acceptance Model to Explain Destination Image Formation: A PLS-SEM Approach

Rafael Fernando Carrera Zurita¹, María Isabel Guacho Tipan², Freddy Daniel Chilig Collaguazo³, María Angeles Guerrero Ortega⁴, Xavier Jarrín González⁵, Nahomi Anahi Marquez Arroyo^{6*}, Wilson Santiago Topón Guallichico⁷

¹Departamento de Ciencias Económicas, Administrativas y de Comercio, Universidad de las Fuerzas Armadas ESPE Sangolquí, Ecuador. E-mail: rfcarrera1@espe.edu.ec, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6667-2123>

²Instituto Superior Tecnológico De Turismo Y Patrimonio Yavirac. E-mail: mguacho@yavirac.edu.ec, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9649-5527>

³Instituto Superior Tecnológico de Turismo y Patrimonio Yavirac. E-mail: fchilig@yavirac.edu.ec, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5187-8387>

⁴Autor Independiente. E-mail: maguerreroor@uide.edu.ec, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/my-orcid?orcid=0009-0007-7924-0910>

⁵Autor Independiente. E-mail: xavier.jarring@gmail.com, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-9579-7601>

⁶Autor Independiente. E-mail: namarquez1@espe.edu.ec, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1587-8361>

⁷Autor Independiente. E-mail: santhys2002@hotmail.com, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-2160-8654>

Abstract

NThe convergence of sustainability governance and artificial intelligence is reshaping how tourists form perceptions of tourism destinations, yet the mechanisms through which ESG destination practices and AI travel technology acceptance jointly influence destination image remain empirically unexplored. This study develops and validates an integrated ESG-TAM model in which ESG destination perceptions (environmental, social, and governance) and TAM constructs (perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and online experience) predict cognitive and affective destination image, with trust proposed as a shared mediating mechanism. A quantitative, cross-sectional design was adopted, collecting data from 227 tourists who had used AI travel planning applications. The hypothesized relationships were tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0 and 5,000 bootstrap resamples. Results confirm that ESG perceptions directly and significantly enhance destination image ($\beta = 0.232, p = 0.033$), with significant indirect effects on both its cognitive ($\beta = 0.225, p = 0.034$) and affective ($\beta = 0.206, p = 0.035$) sub-dimensions. Perceived ease of use emerged as the dominant TAM driver ($\beta = 0.600, p < 0.001$), significantly predicting online experience, which in turn exerted a significant total effect on destination image ($\beta = 0.246, p = 0.018$). The trust mediation hypothesis was not confirmed: although trust was strongly predicted by both ESG perceptions and online experience, it did not significantly transmit to destination image, suggesting that trust operates as a terminal outcome of sustainability and technology acceptance processes rather than as a bridge toward image formation. This study is the first to empirically integrate ESG and TAM within a unified destination image model, directly responding to the research agenda of Huang et al. (2026) and advancing theoretical understanding of how institutional sustainability signals and AI-mediated digital experiences jointly shape tourists' perceptions in the pre-trip planning stage.

Keywords: destination image; ESG perceptions; technology acceptance model; artificial intelligence; online experience; trust; PLS-SEM; sustainable tourism

Introduction

Destination image, encompassing both the cognitive evaluation of a place's objective attributes and the affective appraisal of its emotional resonance, has long been established as a central determinant of tourists' behavioral intentions, from visit decisions to advocacy and loyalty (Suhud et al., 2025; Hassan & Soliman, 2021). As sustainability governance has risen as one of the main factors of global tourism policy, accumulating evidence demonstrates that tourists' perceptions of destinations' environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices constitute a meaningful antecedent to these image evaluations: destinations that visibly commit to ecological stewardship, community inclusion, and transparent management generate enhanced credibility, positive brand associations, and consumer trust (Huang et al., 2026; Shin et al., 2026; Koh et al., 2022). Simultaneously, the rapid diffusion of artificial intelligence (AI) travel tools, encompassing chatbots, recommendation engines, and AI-generated tourism content, has inserted a new technological layer into the pre-trip experience, one that now actively shapes tourists' perceptions of destinations before any direct encounter with the place occurs (Luo et al., 2024; Orden-Mejía et al., 2025). The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), anchored in perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, has been widely validated as the leading framework for explaining tourists' willingness to adopt AI travel technologies across heterogeneous contexts

(Nookhao & Homsud, 2026; Solomovich & Abraham, 2026). Cutting across both streams, trust has been consistently identified as the pivotal psychological mechanism through which sustainability signals and AI interactions translate into consequential tourist outcomes, including destination preference, revisit intention, and responsible travel behavior (Zhang & Jung, 2026; Martínez García de Leaniz et al., 2026; Shi et al., 2021). Despite this convergence of evidence, ESG and TAM research have developed as largely parallel, disconnected streams in the tourism literature, and no empirical study has jointly modeled the influence of ESG destination perception and AI technology acceptance on the formation of destination image through the mediation of trust. Existing ESG tourism research has predominantly focused on firm-level outcomes such as financial resilience, investor confidence, and corporate reputation, leaving largely unexplored how tourists, as external stakeholders, translate ESG signals into cognitive and affective destination images (Shin et al., 2026; Huang et al., 2026). The landmark integration of ESG with the Theory of Planned Behavior by Huang et al. (2026) advanced the field by demonstrating that ESG perceptions shape destination image through psychological mechanisms such as social norms and travel intention; however, those authors explicitly identified the need for future studies to leverage TAM to examine how technology adoption modulates tourists' destination image perceptions, a call that, to date, has not been addressed. On the TAM side, studies examining AI tools in tourism have typically focused on adoption behavior rather than on how AI acceptance, channeled through trust, propagates to modify perceived destination image (Luo et al., 2024; Orden-Mejía et al., 2025; Solomovich & Abraham, 2026). The theoretical significance of this gap is considerable: if ESG perceptions and TAM-grounded AI acceptance both converge on trust as a shared mediating mechanism, integrating them within a single explanatory model may offer a more complete and parsimonious account of how destination images are formed in the contemporary digital-sustainable tourism environment.

To address this gap, this study asks: to what extent do tourists' perceptions of a destination's ESG practices (environmental, social, and governance dimensions) and their experience of AI travel technology (perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use) jointly influence the formation of destination image (cognitive and affective) through the mediation of trust? The overarching objective is to develop and empirically validate an integrated ESG–TAM model in which trust functions as the key psychological bridge linking sustainability and technology antecedents to image outcomes. A quantitative, cross-sectional research design is adopted, employing Partial Least Squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to estimate the direct, mediated, and total effects among the model's constructs from a survey sample of tourists who have used AI tools in their travel planning process.

This study makes several distinct contributions. Theoretically, it offers the first empirical integration of the ESG framework and TAM within a unified model of destination image formation, directly responding to the research agenda established by Huang et al. (2026) and bridging two streams that have hitherto evolved in isolation. By identifying trust as a shared mediator through which both ESG perceptions and AI technology acceptance shape cognitive and affective destination image, the study advances theoretical understanding of the psychological architecture underlying image formation in digitalized, sustainability-aware tourism contexts. Empirically, the model provides novel evidence on the relative explanatory weight of institutional sustainability signals versus AI-mediated pathways in shaping tourists' perceptions of destinations, a distinction with direct strategic implications. For destination management organizations, tourism marketers, and AI technology developers, the findings offer actionable guidance on designing and communicating ESG initiatives alongside AI travel experiences to strengthen tourist trust and, in turn, build more favorable, durable destination images.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The ESG framework emerged from the United Nations Global Compact (2004) as a structured mechanism for evaluating corporate sustainability along three analytically distinct dimensions: environmental responsibility, social inclusion, and governance transparency. In the tourism and hospitality domain, Shin et al. (2026) provide the most comprehensive theoretical treatment to date, tracing how ESG has evolved from an investor-centric financial reporting tool into a consumer-facing signal of organizational legitimacy and long-term social accountability. The environmental pillar encompasses carbon reduction, energy efficiency, waste management, and biodiversity conservation; the social dimension addresses labor equity, community engagement, cultural preservation, and inclusive access; governance reflects regulatory compliance, ethical management, anti-corruption mechanisms, and organizational transparency (Shin et al., 2026; Koh et al., 2022). What distinguishes the tourism context from the corporate finance domain is that tourists engage with ESG not as a performance indicator but as a perceptual and experiential cue that shapes their pre-visit cognitive appraisals and affective impressions of destinations (Huang et al., 2026). This reframing — from ESG as a metric to ESG as an antecedent of image perception — provides the theoretical rationale for treating tourist ESG perception as an exogenous variable in models of destination image formation.

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), formulated by Davis (1989), posits that users' intentions to adopt an information system are determined by two core cognitive beliefs: perceived usefulness (PU) — the degree to which a system is believed to enhance task performance — and perceived ease of use (PEOU) — the degree

to which its use is expected to be effort-free. Across four decades of empirical application, TAM has demonstrated robust predictive validity in diverse technological contexts, and its core constructs have been repeatedly confirmed in tourism technology adoption studies (Nookhao & Homsud, 2026; Ho et al., 2022; Melián-González et al., 2021). A theoretically significant extension emerged from Xia et al. (2018), who proposed that the classical TAM's focus on adoption intent provided an excessively narrow account of technology-mediated tourism experiences and argued instead that PU and PEOU function as antecedents of online experience. Xia et al. (2018) confirmed, through structural equation modeling with maximum likelihood estimation, that this online experience subsequently drives both cognitive and affective dimensions of destination image. The present study adopts this extended architecture as the theoretical backbone for the TAM component of the model, adapting the smartphone-application context of Xia et al. (2018) to the contemporary setting of AI-powered travel planning tools.

Trust constitutes a pivotal psychological gateway in both sustainability-oriented and technology-adoption literatures. In the ESG context, trust is the mechanism through which institutional sustainability signals are internalized as genuinely credible commitments thereby enabling positive image formation (Zhang & Jung, 2026; Hassan & Soliman, 2021; Leaniz et al., 2026). In the AI adoption literature, trust mediates the relationship between perceived technological attributes and users' willingness to engage deeply with algorithmic systems, acting as the affective bridge between cognitive evaluation and behavioral or attitudinal outcomes (Shi et al., 2021; Solomovich & Abraham, 2026). The theoretical contribution of this study lies in positioning trust as a shared mediating construct that simultaneously connects ESG perception and AI-mediated online experience with destination image formation, a dual-pathway configuration not previously operationalized in the empirical literature.

2.2 ESG Practices and Destination Image

Research on the ESG–destination image relationship has accumulated rapidly since 2020, though it remains fragmented across levels of analysis and varies in its treatment of ESG dimensionality. Early contributions in adjacent domains established the conceptual groundwork: Koh et al. (2022), in a PLS-SEM study of South Korean consumers, found that the social and governance dimensions of perceived ESG positively influenced brand credibility and brand image, whereas the environmental dimension produced no significant direct effects on these brand-related constructs. This dimensional asymmetry challenges the widespread assumption that all three ESG pillars exert uniform positive effects and signals that governance and social dimensions may carry greater perceptual salience for consumers who lack direct observation of environmental outcomes (Zhang & Jung, 2026; Fan & Kim, 2025).

At the destination level, Suhud et al. (2025), in a study of Ijen Geopark, Indonesia ($n = 424$), confirmed that destination sustainability directly enhanced destination image and credibility, with credibility further mediating the path to visit intention. Their findings introduce an important moderating condition: the destination's geological and heritage character amplifies the salience of environmental sustainability cues, suggesting that ESG–image effects may vary systematically across destination typologies. In the most theoretically proximate predecessor to the present study, Huang et al. (2026) developed and validated an ESG–Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) model ($n = 677$ in Taiwan), demonstrating that tourists' ESG perceptions shape destination image through the sequential mediation of social norms and travel intention. While their model advances the field significantly, it relies on psychological-behavioral mediators (norms, intention) rather than technological acceptance variables, and its sample is geographically confined to Taiwan — a limitation the authors explicitly flag. Zhang & Jung (2026) extended the ESG–image–outcome chain to hotel booking contexts using a dual-method PLS-SEM and fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) design, revealing that social and governance activities were more reliably associated with corporate image than environmental activities, and that corporate image and consumer trust mediated the ESG–booking relationship through differentiated psychological pathways. Fan & Kim (2025) corroborated these patterns in a study of the Chinese hotel market, finding that environmental and social dimensions positively influenced both corporate image and trust, while governance failed to reach significance for trust, confirming that governance's image-building effect depends critically on how its transparency is communicated to consumers.

Methodologically, the dominant approach in this literature is a cross-sectional survey design with SEM (PLS or CB), applied predominantly to East Asian samples. This concentration raises questions about the generalizability of cultural and market insights, given that ESG awareness and sensitivity vary substantially across consumer populations (Shin et al., 2026).

H1: Tourists' perceptions of a destination's ESG practices (environmental, social, and governance) have a positive effect on destination image (cognitive and affective).

2.3 Perceived Usefulness, Perceived Ease of Use, and Online Experience with AI Travel Applications

The application of TAM to AI-mediated travel contexts has generated a substantial empirical record, yet the specific pathway from PU and PEOU to online experience, rather than adoption intention, has received limited

systematic attention beyond the formulation by Xia et al. (2018). In their foundational study, Xia et al. (2018) established that both perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use significantly predict users' online experience with official destination smartphone apps, treating online experience as a richer and more theoretically meaningful outcome than a simple binary adoption decision. Their argument rests on the observation that in tourism, the pre-trip information experience shapes image formation and behavioral intention in ways that pure adoption models fail to capture.

Recent AI-specific studies lend indirect but consistent support to these pathways, typically through proxy constructs that overlap substantially with online experience. Orden-Mejía et al. (2025), in a TAM-informed study of AI chatbots in destination decision-making, found that information quality enhanced perceived usefulness and user satisfaction, with satisfaction representing the experiential residue of the interaction. Solomovich & Abraham (2026) applied TAM to ChatGPT-integrated chatbot planning tools and confirmed that perceived ease of use significantly and positively predicted behavioral intentions, a relationship partially mediated by trust, suggesting that PEOU's effect on experiential outcomes operates through affective pathways as well as cognitive ones. Nookhao & Homsud (2026) integrated TAM with the innovation-decision process in a Thai tourism context, confirming PU and PEOU as significant predictors of adoption, while observing that contextual factors unique to emerging markets moderated these relationships. Ho et al. (2022) extended TAM with self-efficacy, subjective norms, and technology knowledge in a Malaysian tourism and hospitality sample, finding that attitude fully mediated the paths from both PEOU and PU to behavioral intention.

A recurring limitation across these studies is measurement heterogeneity: most instruments operationalize the downstream consequence of PU and PEOU as intention, satisfaction, or attitude, rather than as the multi-dimensional online experience construct validated by Xia et al. (2018). This makes direct comparison difficult and leaves this relationship with experience underspecified in AI contexts. The present study addresses this gap by adapting Xia et al.'s (2018) experience scale to AI travel applications, providing a theoretically grounded and empirically validated measure of how TAM cognitive beliefs translate into experiential engagement.

H2: Tourists' perceived usefulness of AI travel applications positively affects their online experience when using AI applications for travel planning.

H3: Tourists' perceived ease of use of AI travel applications has a positive effect on their online experience of using AI applications for travel planning.

2.4 Online Experience with AI Applications and Destination Image

The mechanism through which digital interaction experiences shape tourists' destination image perceptions has evolved from a web-based information-processing paradigm to an AI-driven experiential model, and Xia et al. (2018) provide the clearest structural account of this pathway. Their SEM results confirmed significant positive relationships between users' online experience with destination smartphone apps and both cognitive image (beliefs about the destination's objective attributes) and affective image (emotional feelings toward the destination), with cognitive image further predicting affective image and both dimensions loading onto overall destination image. The implication is theoretically important: the quality, depth, and engagement of a digital interaction with destination-related content activate image-formation processes before any physical visit, and these pre-formed images are consequently technology-mediated rather than solely experience-derived.

More recent evidence from AI-specific contexts extends and contextualizes this pathway. Luo et al. (2024), in a structural analysis of AI interactive approaches in Chinese travel apps, found that informativeness, playfulness, and personalization significantly influenced perceived destination images and subsequently predicted travel choices. The personalization dimension was particularly powerful, suggesting that AI's capacity to generate individualized content amplifies the image-shaping effect of the online experience. Nguyen et al. (2026) found, in a Vietnamese PLS-SEM study, that chatbot diagnostic and relevance shaped sustainable destination brand image, while interaction factors, including anthropomorphism, influenced image through a separate pathway, indicating that the experiential richness of AI interaction has multi-channel effects on image formation. Egger & Yu (2025), applying the narrative transportation framework to hyper-personalized AI-generated tourism images, demonstrated that perceived similarity between the generated content and the tourist's own identity enhanced narrative immersion, which in turn strengthened destination visit intentions. Tedjakusuma et al. (2025) found that trust in ChatGPT's travel recommendations significantly predicted destination visit intentions, with destination image theorized as a potential moderator, reinforcing image's role as a downstream outcome of AI-mediated tourist interactions.

Despite this growing body of evidence, no study has modeled online experience, as the explicit structural antecedent of destination image in an AI-specific context. The present study fills this gap by directly testing the next hypothesis.

H4: Tourists' online experience of using AI travel applications has a positive effect on their perception of destination image.

2.5 Trust as Mediator between ESG Perceptions, AI Online Experience, and Destination Image

The mediating role of trust in tourism has been theorized and confirmed across two partially overlapping

research streams: one rooted in sustainability governance and another in technology adoption; yet no study has modeled trust as a simultaneous mediator linking both antecedent streams to a common destination image outcome.

In the ESG and destination sustainability literature, trust operates as the credibility mechanism through which external stakeholders evaluate whether institutional sustainability commitments are genuine and consequential. Hassan & Soliman (2021) confirmed, in an Egyptian domestic tourism sample, that destination social responsibility positively and significantly influenced holidaymakers' perceived trust, which in turn mediated the DSR–revisit intention relationship alongside destination reputation. Mercadé Melé et al. (2020) demonstrated that trust was a partial mediator between both sustainability practices and green image on one side, and revisit intention on the other. Leaniz et al. (2026) extended this logic to sustainability certification across U.S. (and Spanish, finding that recognition of certification bodies enhanced trust, which in turn positively predicted perceptions of certified destination social responsibility and preference for certified destinations. Zhang & Jung (2026) similarly confirmed that ESG activities were associated with consumer trust, which, in turn, mediated the ESG–booking intention relationship alongside corporate image, while nan fsQCA analysis revealed multiple configurational pathways through which trust contributed to high booking intention across different combinations of ESG conditions.

In the AI adoption literature, trust functions differently but is equally theoretically central. Shi et al. (2021), drawing on the heuristic-systematic model in a Journal of Travel Research study, found that both systematic cues (information quality, argument strength) and heuristic cues (interface design, provider reputation) shaped cognitive and emotional trust in AI recommendation systems, which in turn drove adoption intention. Emotional trust had a stronger effect on adoption as a delegated agent than cognitive trust, suggesting that the experiential dimension of trust is particularly important when tourists surrender decision-making to algorithmic systems. Solomovich & Abraham (2026) confirmed that trust partially mediated the relationship between perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness in a ChatGPT tourism context, indicating that the experiential dimension of PEOU generates trust as an intermediate affective state before shaping perceived utility assessments. These findings collectively support the theoretical proposition that online experience with AI travel tools builds trust, and that this trust subsequently shapes how travel information is perceived and evaluated.

The present study extends this dual logic by proposing trust as a mediator linking both ESG perceptions and the AI online experience to destination image formation. The rationale is that tourists who perceive a destination's ESG practices as credible are more likely to trust the destination as a whole, and that tourists who have a positive, high-quality experience with AI tools providing destination information are more likely to trust both the tool and the information it conveys — with both trust pathways converging on more favorable cognitive and affective destination image evaluations.

H5: Trust mediates the relationships between (a) tourists' ESG perceptions of a destination and destination image, and (b) tourists' online experience with AI travel applications and destination image.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Sample

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional research design grounded in Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to examine the hypothesized relationships among ESG destination perception, TAM constructs, trust, and destination image. PLS-SEM was selected for three reasons. First, the model is complex, comprising seven latent constructs and 45 reflective indicators, making variance-based PLS-SEM estimation appropriate (Hair et al., 2019). Second, PLS-SEM imposes minimal distributional assumptions and performs well with modest sample sizes relative to the model's complexity (Hair et al., 2022). Third, the majority of previous studies examining AI technology acceptance and destination image in tourism have employed PLS-SEM with SmartPLS software (Koh et al., 2022; Tedjakusuma et al., 2025; Nguyen et al., 2026; Hassan & Soliman, 2021), ensuring comparability of results. The obtained sample was 227, that provides sufficient statistical power for the PLS-SEM estimation.

Data were collected through a structured self-administered questionnaire distributed to international and domestic tourists who had used digital technologies, including AI-powered travel applications, chatbots, or AI-based itinerary planning tools, during trip planning or at a tourism destination. The sampling procedure combined purposive and convenience sampling, following the approach adopted by Huang et al. (2026). Specifically, prior to participation, potential respondents were screened with two eligibility questions: (1) whether they had used any AI-based travel application or digital tool to plan or enhance a tourism experience, and (2) whether they were aware of sustainability or ESG-related practices at a tourism destination. Individuals who did not meet these criteria were excluded from the study. This approach ensured that the sample reflected the target population and minimized uninformed responses on the constructs of interest.

Data collection was conducted over an four-week period through an online survey platform. The survey link was distributed via social media channels and tourism-related digital communities. To address potential common method bias (CMB), a concern inherent to single-source, self-reported data, Harman's single-factor

test was conducted prior to hypothesis testing (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The results indicated that the first unrotated factor accounted for less than 50% of the total variance, suggesting that common method variance is not a substantial concern in this study.

3.2 Measures

The survey questionnaire was structured into three sections. The first section captured respondents' demographic profile, including gender, age, education level, travel frequency. The second section measured the study's key latent constructs. The third section included the trust and destination image items. All measurement items were adapted from validated scales in prior research. Each item was rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 7 ("Strongly Agree"). ESG destination perception was measured using 12 items covering three sub-dimensions: environmental practices (4 items), social practices (4 items), and governance practices (4 items), adapted from Zhang and Jung (2026). Items were rephrased to refer to "this tourist destination" to align with the destination context of the present study.

TAM constructs were operationalized following the model of Xia et al. (2018), which extends Davis's (1989) original Technology Acceptance Model to the destination online experience context. Perceived usefulness (PU) was measured using 5 items reflecting the degree to which tourists believe that using AI travel applications enhances their travel planning performance. Perceived ease of use (PEOU) was measured using 6 items assessing the effort-free interaction with AI travel applications. Online experience (OLEX), the mediating TAM construct linking PU and PEOU to destination image (H2, H3, H4), was measured using 4 items adapted from No and Kim (2014), capturing the enjoyability, visual engagement, perceived value, and recommendation propensity of the AI travel app experience.

Trust was measured using a 7-item unified scale combining two facets: (a) trust in the destination's ESG practices (4 items adapted from Zhang & Jung, 2026) and (b) trust in AI travel app recommendations (3 items adapted from Tedjakusuma et al., 2025). Destination image (dependent variable) was operationalized in two sub-dimensions: Cognitive destination image was measured using 11 items encompassing local facilities and environmental quality. Affective destination image was measured using 4 items adapted from Gil and Ritchie (2009).

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using SmartPLS 4.0, following a two-step approach recommended for PLS-SEM: assessment of the measurement model (outer model) followed by evaluation of the structural model (inner model) (Hair et al., 2019; 2022). The reliability and validity of all reflective constructs were examined using four criteria: First, indicator reliability was assessed by examining the outer loadings; values ≥ 0.70 were considered acceptable (Hair et al., 2019). Second, internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha \geq 0.70$) and composite reliability (CR ≥ 0.70 ; Nunnally, 1978). Third, convergent validity was confirmed when the average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded 0.50 for each construct, indicating that the construct explains more than half the variance in its indicators (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Fourth, discriminant validity was evaluated using the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT), with values below 0.85 indicating adequate discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015). The HTMT criterion was preferred over the Fornell–Larcker criterion due to its greater sensitivity in detecting violations of discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2022).

Following measurement model validation, the structural model was evaluated by examining path coefficients (β), their statistical significance via 5,000 bootstrap resamples, and the explained variance (R^2) for each endogenous construct. The mediating roles of online experience (OLEX) and trust were tested using the bootstrapping approach with 5,000 resamples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (BC-CI), following Hayes (2022) and Preacher and Hayes (2008). A mediation effect is considered significant when the confidence interval excludes zero (Hayes, 2022). Partial mediation was distinguished from full mediation by examining whether the independent variable's direct effect on the dependent variable remained significant after controlling for the mediator (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Zhao et al., 2010).

4. Results

4.1 Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was evaluated following the two-step procedure recommended by Hair et al. (2019; 2022). All reflective constructs were assessed for indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, and convergent validity. Table 1 presents the final reliability and convergent validity statistics.

Table 1. Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's α	rho_a	rho_c	AVE
Environmental	0.890	0.893	0.924	0.752
Social	0.872	0.875	0.912	0.722
Governance	0.933	0.933	0.952	0.833

Construct	Cronbach's α	rho_a	rho_c	AVE
ESG Perceptions	0.924	0.926	0.935	0.547
Perceived Usefulness (PU)	0.913	0.927	0.937	0.750
Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU)	0.918	0.947	0.941	0.734
Online Experience (OLEX)	0.917	0.918	0.942	0.801
Trust	0.958	0.958	0.965	0.800
Cognitive Image	0.888	0.895	0.908	0.503
Affective Image	0.809	0.811	0.875	0.638
Image Destination	0.915	0.920	0.927	0.512

All Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.809 to 0.958, and all composite reliability (rho_c) values ranged from 0.875 to 0.965, well above the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019), confirming adequate internal consistency reliability. All AVE values exceeded 0.50 after item refinement, confirming convergent validity for all constructs. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio of correlations and all HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of 0.85, indicating that each construct is empirically distinct from the others in the model.

4.2. Structural Model

Prior to hypothesis testing, the predictive accuracy of the structural model was evaluated through the coefficient of determination (R^2) for each endogenous construct (Table 2). The model explains 73.5% of the variance in Online Experience (OLEX), 79.1% in Trust, and 23.6% in Destination Image. The second-order Image Destination construct accounts for 94.1% of the variance in Cognitive Image and 78.8% in Affective Image, confirming the adequacy of the hierarchical measurement structure.

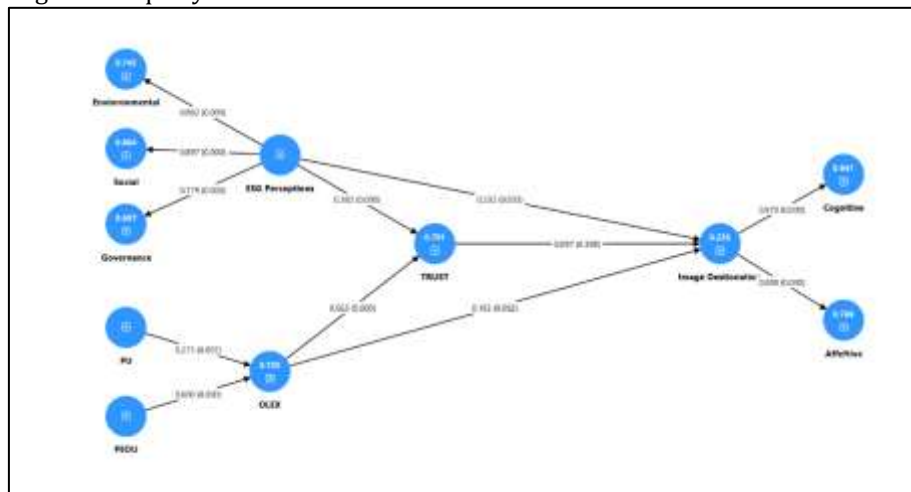


Figure 1. Structural Model

Table 2. Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

Endogenous Construct	R^2	Interpretation
Online Experience (OLEX)	0.735	Substantial
Trust	0.791	Substantial
Image Destination	0.236	Moderate
Cognitive Image	0.941	Substantial
Affective Image	0.788	Substantial

Note. R^2 interpretation follows Hair et al. (2019): < 0.25 = weak; $0.25-0.50$ = moderate; > 0.50 = substantial. The R^2 values for Cognitive and Affective correspond to their variance explained by the second-order Image Destination construct.

Hypothesis testing was conducted using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples and two-tailed p-values (Hair et al., 2022). Table 3 presents the standardized path coefficients, p-values, and hypothesis decisions.

Table 3. Results of Direct Effects and Hypothesis Testing

Hyp.	Path	β	p-value	Decision
H1	ESG Perceptions $\rightarrow$ Image Destination	0.232	0.033	Supported
H2	Perceived Usefulness $\rightarrow$ OLEX	0.273	0.007	Supported

Hyp.	Path	β	p-value	Decision
H3	Perceived Ease of Use $\rightarrow$ OLEX	0.600	0.000	Supported
H4	OLEX $\rightarrow$ Image Destination	0.192	0.082	Not Supported

H1 was supported ($\beta = 0.232$, $p = 0.033$), confirming that tourists' positive ESG destination perceptions directly and significantly enhance their destination image. H2 was supported ($\beta = 0.273$, $p = 0.007$), indicating that perceived usefulness of AI travel applications positively influences online experience. H3 was the strongest supported path in the model ($\beta = 0.600$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that perceived ease of use is the primary driver of AI-based online experience. H4 was not supported ($\beta = 0.192$, $p = 0.082$), suggesting that online experience with AI travel applications does not exert a statistically significant direct effect on destination image, though the direction of the relationship is consistent with the hypothesis.

Mediation Analysis

The mediating role of Trust was tested using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples and bias-corrected confidence intervals (Hayes, 2022). Table 3 presents the specific indirect effects relevant to H5.

Table 3. Specific Indirect Effects – Mediation Through Trust (H5)

Path	β (indirect)	STDEV	T	p-value	Decision
ESG Perceptions $\rightarrow$ Trust $\rightarrow$ Image Destination	0.037	0.044	0.838	0.402	Not Supported
OLEX $\rightarrow$ Trust $\rightarrow$ Image Destination	0.054	0.066	0.826	0.409	Not Supported

Note. Bootstrapping: 5,000 resamples, two-tailed. Significance threshold: $p < 0.05$.

H5 is not supported. Although Trust is strongly predicted by both ESG Perceptions ($\beta = 0.382$, $p < 0.001$) and OLEX ($\beta = 0.563$, $p < 0.001$), the path from Trust to Destination Image is small and non-significant ($\beta = 0.097$, $p = 0.398$). Consequently, neither indirect effect reaches statistical significance, and the 95% confidence intervals for both include zero, indicating the absence of trust-mediated effects under the conventional significance threshold.

5. Discussion

The finding that ESG destination perceptions exert a significant and positive direct effect on destination image constitutes the central theoretical contribution of this study and is consistent with a growing body of literature that positions ESG as a structural driver of tourists' cognitive and affective evaluations. This result directly extends Huang et al. (2026), who's integrated ESG-TPB model demonstrated that ESG perceptions strengthen destination image by activating social norms and shaping travel intention in a Taiwanese sample. The present study confirms that this relationship holds even in the absence of TPB mediators, suggesting a direct perceptual link between ESG signals and image formation that does not require normative or intentional intermediaries. The result also is related with Koh et al. (2022), who found that perceived ESG significantly enhances brand image in a South Korean consumer context, and with Zhang and Jung (2026), who demonstrated that hotel ESG practices directly strengthen corporate image and consumer trust. At the destination level, the finding aligns with recent evidence from an emerging market context, where ESG image components, were found to significantly influence destination trust and visit intention. Taken together, the convergence of these results across hospitality firms, hotel chains, and tourism destinations reinforces the ecological validity of ESG as a cross-contextual image driver.

About TAM Constructs and Online Experience, both H2 and H3 were supported, replicating and extending the core TAM findings of Xia et al. (2018) in a more technologically advanced context. While Xia et al. (2018) applied his model to destination smartphone applications, the present study confirms that this structural relationship transfers to AI travel planning applications, validating the generalizability of Davis's (1989) model to emerging AI-mediated tourism contexts. This result is consistent with Nookhao and Homsud (2026), Solomovich and Abraham (2026), and Orden-Mejía et al. (2025), all of whom found that TAM constructs significantly predict AI adoption intentions in tourism planning scenarios.

A notable finding is the substantially larger coefficient for PEOU ($\beta = 0.600$) relative to PU ($\beta = 0.273$), indicating that perceived ease of use is the dominant driver of AI-based online experience in this sample. This pattern is consistent with recent evidence suggesting that, for novel AI technologies the ease of interaction is a more salient psychological driver than expected utility. Solomovich and Abraham (2026) reported a similar dominance of PEOU in their ChatGPT-TAM model among Israeli tourists, attributing it to the cognitive friction associated with interacting with AI systems whose outputs remain uncertain. When a technology is perceived as easy to use, it reduces this cognitive burden and facilitates immersive engagement with technology experience.

An additional finding of theoretical interest is that PEOU exerts a significant total indirect effect on Image Destination ($\beta = 0.148$, $p = 0.028$), demonstrating that the path PEOU $\rightarrow$ OLEX $\rightarrow$ Image Destination constitutes

a viable chain linking technology usability to destination image formation

H4 received partial empirical support. The direct effect of OLEX on Image Destination did not reach conventional statistical significance ($\beta = 0.192$, $p = 0.082$), yet the total effect was significant ($\beta = 0.246$, $p = 0.018$). This pattern suggests that OLEX influences Destination Image not only through a direct path but also through downstream effects on Trust ($\beta = 0.563$, $p < 0.001$) and, indirectly, through the cumulative TAM chain. This result partially diverges from Xia et al. (2018). A plausible contextual explanation is that Xia et al. (2018) focused on official destination marketing websites accessed during or after the trip, where the online experience is more directly tied to destination evaluation. In contrast, AI travel planning applications are primarily used in the pre-trip stage, creating a temporal distance between the AI experience and destination image formation that may attenuate the direct path. This interpretation is supported by Luo et al. (2024), who noted that AI interactive approaches influence destination image perceptions most strongly when they simulate realistic destination content, a condition less consistently met by generic AI travel apps than by destination-specific digital platforms.

The non-confirmation of H5 is arguably the most theoretically generative finding of this study, as it challenges a widely assumed mediation pathway in the sustainable tourism literature (Hassan & Soliman, 2021; Mercadé Melé et al., 2020) and opens a productive reinterpretation of trust's role in AI-mediated tourism contexts.

The structural model reveals an asymmetric pattern: Trust is strongly and significantly predicted by both ESG Perceptions, confirming that tourists who perceive a destination's ESG commitment and enjoy their AI travel app experience develop elevated trust. However, this trust does not significantly transmit to Destination Image. This result suggests that trust serves as a terminal outcome of the ESG and TAM processes, not as an intermediary in image formation (Jafarova et al., 2026). This reinterpretation is consistent with a strand of literature that positions trust as a consequence of image rather than an antecedent. Prayag and Ryan (2012) and a recent empirical study (Akbar, et al., 2022) demonstrated that destination image formation precedes trust development, with satisfaction serving as a mediating mechanism. In this alternative pathway, tourists first form cognitive and affective images of the destination, and trust subsequently crystallizes as a summary evaluative judgment of destination reliability.

Furthermore, Hassan and Soliman (2021) and Mercadé Melé et al. (2020) operationalized trust as a mediator of revisit intention and loyalty, rather than of destination image formation. Tedjakusuma et al. (2025) similarly found that trust in ChatGPT travel recommendations influences destination visit intentions (behavioral), not image perceptions (cognitive/affective). This distinction between behavioral and perceptual outcomes appears critical: trust may function as a bridge toward behavioral intentions but not toward cognitive-affective image formation, which is driven more directly by perceptual inputs (ESG signals, digital experience quality) than by evaluative summaries. Shi et al. (2021) provide further support for this interpretation, demonstrating, in the context of an AI recommendation system, that trust functions as an adoption facilitator—a bridge toward behavioral engagement—rather than as a modifier of perceptual constructs.

Implications

This study advances the theoretical understanding of destination image formation by demonstrating, for the first time, that ESG destination perceptions and AI travel technology acceptance jointly and independently predict destination image, operating through distinct perceptual pathways rather than through a shared trust mechanism. By integrating the ESG framework with the TAM-based online experience model of Xia et al. (2018) into a unified structural model, the study responds to the explicit call of Huang et al. (2026) to leverage TAM in exploring how technology adoption influences destination image perceptions, while simultaneously extending Zhang and Jung (2026) and Koh et al. (2022) beyond the corporate/hospitality context to the destination level. The non-confirmation of trust as a mediator constitutes a theoretically generative finding: it challenges the assumptions of Hassan and Soliman (2021) and Mercadé Melé et al. (2020), who positioned trust as a bridge between sustainability perceptions and behavioral outcomes, and suggests instead that in AI-mediated contexts trust operates as a terminal outcome of the ESG and technology acceptance processes rather than as an intermediary toward image formation. This repositioning of trust aligns with Shi et al.'s (2021) finding that trust in AI systems functions primarily as an adoption facilitator toward behavioral intentions, not as a modifier of cognitive-affective perceptions, and invites future research to test revised models in which trust mediates the downstream path from destination image toward visit intention and loyalty.

About practical implications, destination management organizations (DMOs), tourism marketers, and AI travel platform developers should recognize that ESG communication and AI usability are complementary and mutually reinforcing levers for shaping tourists' destination image. On the ESG side, DMOs should prioritize visible, concrete, and verifiable sustainability actions and communicate them through digital channels accessible at the pre-trip planning stage; transparency of ESG practices is sufficient to generate positive cognitive and affective image evaluations. On the technology side, the dominance of PEOU over PU implies that AI travel app developers should invest primarily in interface simplicity, intuitive navigation, and frictionless interaction design rather than in expanding functional capabilities, as usability drives the online experience that ultimately contributes to image formation.

6. Conclusions

This study examined how ESG destination perceptions and AI travel technology acceptance jointly shape tourists' destination image, with trust as a proposed mediating mechanism. Using PLS-SEM with a sample of 227 tourists, the structural model confirmed three of the five hypotheses and produced a set of results that are both practically actionable and theoretically consequential. H1 confirmed that ESG destination perceptions directly and significantly enhance destination image, with significant indirect effects on both its cognitive and affective sub-dimensions, validating the extension of ESG research from the corporate to the destination level. H2 and H3 confirmed that perceived usefulness and, most powerfully, perceived ease of use of AI travel applications significantly drive tourists' online experience. H4 received partial support, the total effect of online experience on destination image was significant, though the direct path did not reach conventional significance, suggesting a more distributed and mediated influence of AI experience on image formation. H5, the trust mediation hypothesis, was not confirmed, while trust was strongly predicted by both ESG perceptions and online experience, it did not significantly transmit to destination image, suggesting that trust operates as a co-produced outcome of sustainability and technology acceptance processes rather than as a perceptual bridge toward image. Taken together, these findings offer a theoretically refined and empirically grounded

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged to appropriately situate the findings and guide subsequent inquiry. First, the cross-sectional design prevents causal inference; the structural relationships reported are associative, and the temporal sequencing of ESG perception, AI experience, trust formation, and image construction cannot be established from a single-wave survey. Longitudinal or experimental designs would allow researchers to track how destination image evolves as tourists progress from pre-trip AI-assisted planning through the on-site experience to post-trip evaluation. Second, the online experience construct (OLEX) was operationalized following No and Kim (2014) as adapted by Xia et al. (2018) for destination apps; applying this construct to the heterogeneous landscape of AI travel applications, which includes generative AI planners, recommendation chatbots, and AI-curated content platforms, introduces measurement ambiguity that future studies should resolve through context-specific scale development. Third, the governance sub-dimension of ESG yielded the lowest R^2 within the second-order ESG construct, suggesting that tourists find governance practices less visible or less interpretable than environmental and social actions; future research should investigate how governance transparency mechanisms, such as third-party ESG certification and public reporting, can be communicated more effectively to strengthen their influence on destination perceptions.

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