

Sustainable Tourism and Destination Branding

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Introduction

As global environmental awareness grows around the globe, sustainable tourism has become a priority within the tourism industry (Boley & Green, 2016; Gössling, 2018). In today's culture, consumers increasingly seek travel experiences that align with eco-conscious values, making sustainable tourism and destination branding essential for attracting responsible travelers and supporting long-term environmental goals (Phung & Nguyen, 2023; The Tourism Space, 2023). Destinations are integrating sustainable practices into their branding, establishing unique positions that appeal to eco-conscious tourists and respond to demands for environmental and social responsibility (Hivo, n.d.; Ushakov et al., 2018).

Sustainable tourism, a form of travel that limits negative impacts caused by tourism, extends beyond environmental concerns, also promoting cultural preservation and community well-being (Alam et al., 2022). Destinations like Thailand illustrate this by transitioning their branding to emphasize environmental stewardship, enhancing appeal to travelers, and addressing broader global sustainability trends (Ushakov et al., 2018). In turn, destination branding, which is creating a unique identity for a specific geographic region, becomes a key tool in shaping consumer perceptions and loyalty, especially through visual elements that communicate a commitment to sustainability (Adamus-Matuszyńska et al., 2021; Fernandez-Cavia & Lopez, 2013).

Addressing sustainability in marketing, visual branding's role in shaping perceptions, and eco-tourism's impact on fostering stewardship provides insights into branding practices that balance tourism growth with environmental preservation. This approach offers a roadmap for

destinations in an era where sustainability is both an expectation and a necessity (Bobovnick, 2010; Miguez-Gonzalez & Fernandez-Cavia, 2015).

Literature Review

Sustainability as a Marketing Strategy

Sustainability has become a critical component of modern marketing strategies, particularly in the tourism industry. There has been a trend towards promoting local businesses, eco-transport options, and conservation initiatives to attract environmentally conscious consumers (Phung & Nguyen, 2023). This shift aligns with a broader marketing strategy where sustainability is central to brand identity, appealing to travelers who value environmental responsibility and social impact (The Tourism Space, 2023; Ushakov et al., 2018). By highlighting these commitments, brands not only gain competitive advantage but also build trust and loyalty among eco-conscious travelers, reinforcing long-term brand equity (Hivo, n.d.).

Aligning Sustainability with Global Trends Sustainability is becoming a dominant global trend, and destination brands are connecting their strategies with environmentally conscious practices more now than ever (The Tourism Space, 2023). This connection not only reflects global consumer preferences but also responds to the demand for tourism models that prioritize long-term environmental and social benefits (Phung and Nguyen 2023). Integrating sustainable practices into marketing and communication strategies has become essential for developing brands with strong eco-conscious identities (Phung and Nguyen 2023). Consumers now expect environmental responsibility out of brands, and Phung and Nguyen (2023) found that such expectations play a significant role in shaping brand equity and strengthening market presence, especially as brands that align with eco-conscious values tend to build greater consumer loyalty.

Phung and Nguyen (2023) focused on how brands benefit from aligning with sustainability to build market presence through bibliometric analysis. Their study indicated that brands perceived as genuinely committed to environmental values experience increased market presence and consumer loyalty (Phung & Nguyen, 2023). The study underscores that these sustainable branding efforts resonate with global trends in consumer behavior, where buyers increasingly prioritize green values. Phung & Nguyen (2023) explain that brands that successfully incorporate sustainability into their core identity not only attract a more loyal customer base but also strengthen their position in a competitive market by aligning with consumer expectations for corporate environmental responsibility. On the other hand, The Tourism Space (2023), a consultancy that specializes in enabling sustainable, regenerative, and collaborative approaches to tourism, also underscored the shift of sustainability from a niche concern to a central element of destination marketing strategies. The Tourism Space (2023) highlighted the broader operational changes destinations must adopt to mitigate tourism's negative impacts. Marketing is no longer solely about attracting visitors but also about protecting local environments and communities (The Tourism Space, 2023). Additionally, this shift is very important for destinations aiming to balance tourism growth with environmental conservation, reinforcing their long-term viability in an increasingly competitive market.

Thailand's tourism branding provides a practical example of these global trends. Ushakov et al. (2018) conducted surveys targeting two key groups: foreign tourists who had visited Bangkok and representatives from Thailand's tourism businesses. The analysis of these surveys revealed that both tourists and industry professionals prioritize values such as environmental friendliness, safety, and modern infrastructure in Bangkok's tourism brand. They explained that Thailand has changed its tourism branding from emphasizing exoticism to focusing on values

like sustainability, safety, and modern infrastructure. Ushakov et. al (2018) also found that this shift reflects the needs of both international visitors and local tourism businesses, who prioritize environmental friendliness and safety as essential values. Their study of Bangkok tourism industry representatives highlighted the importance of these values in building a competitive and sustainable brand identity, positioning Thailand not only as an appealing destination but also as a leader in responsible tourism within Southeast Asia (Ushakov et al., 2018). This evolution reflects both the focus on brand equity discussed by Phung and Nguyen (2023) and the operational shift highlighted by The Tourism Space (2023). Thailand's rebranding efforts align with international sustainability trends, enhancing its appeal to eco-conscious travelers while also safeguarding its environmental assets (Ushakov et al. 2018).

Gaining Long-term Brand Loyalty through Eco-conscious Consumer Engagement Building long-term brand loyalty in the tourism sector depends on engaging eco-conscious consumers. As sustainability becomes a core value for travelers, destinations that inherit environmentally friendly practices are more likely to build lasting relationships (Phung & Nguyen 2023). Phung and Nguyen (2023) found that brands integrating visible, authentic sustainable practices positively influence consumer perceptions and brand equity, as these consumers tend to value corporate environmental responsibility. This enhanced brand image, in turn, strengthens consumer trust and loyalty, reinforcing a brand's competitive presence in the market. Phung and Nguyen (2023) also argued that consumers' perceptions of a brand's environmental value are crucial for market success. They also asserted that brands that show a clear commitment to sustainability are better positioned to create positive associations and foster loyalty (Phung & Nguyen 2023). Alam et al. (2022) also highlighted eco-tourism branding in emerging economies, noting that sustainable infrastructure and conservation efforts boost destination brand equity.

While Phung and Nguyen (2023) focused on consumer perceptions, Alam et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of tangible sustainable practices. Alam et al. (2022) focused on how sustainable infrastructure and conservation initiatives strengthen destination brand equity. Through survey research with eco-tourism stakeholders, Alam et al. (2022) found that visible, tangible sustainable practices—such as investing in environmentally friendly infrastructure and supporting local conservation efforts—positively influence consumer perceptions of brand reliability and responsibility. Unlike Phung and Nguyen (2023), who emphasized consumer perceptions, Alam et al. (2022) showed that concrete sustainable actions directly impact brand loyalty by reinforcing a destination’s appeal to eco-conscious travelers, who are more likely to return and advocate for destinations that reflect their environmental values. This approach enhances long-term loyalty, as destinations gain credibility by authentically aligning with sustainable tourism principles. Additionally, Hivo (n.d.), a digital asset management platform, focused on education. While Phung and Nguyen (2023) and Alam et al. (2022) discussed structural and strategic elements, Hivo (n.d.) highlighted the importance of educating tourists about sustainable practices. This creates a stronger connection between travelers and the destination. Informed travelers are more inclined to support destinations that actively contribute to sustainability (Hivo n.d.). This engagement both builds loyalty and turns travelers into advocates for the destination (Hivo n.d.).

Visual Elements in Destination Branding for Sustainable Locations

The visual elements used in destination branding play a critical role in communicating sustainability efforts and attracting eco-conscious travelers. By utilizing imagery that highlights natural landscapes, local culture, and conservation efforts, destinations can reinforce their commitment to sustainability and appeal to environmentally aware tourists (Fernandez-Cavia &

Lopez, 2013). On the other hand, the challenge often lies in ensuring that these visual messages align with long-term economic sustainability goals. While many branding strategies incorporate visual symbols of sustainability, like nature and cultural heritage, they sometimes fall short in addressing the economic dimensions necessary for true long-term sustainability (Adamus-Matuszyńska et. al 2021).

Utilizing Nature, Imagery, and Cultural Symbols to Engage Eco-conscious Travelers Visual elements in destination branding, like nature-based imagery and cultural symbols, are central to attracting eco-conscious travelers. These elements communicate a destination's commitment to sustainability by showcasing its natural landscapes and cultural heritage (Adamus-Matuszynska et al. 2021). Fernández-Cavia and López (2013) analyzed mobile applications from Spanish destinations, noting that features like geolocation maps and photo galleries helped showcase natural attractions and enhance traveler engagement. However, they identified a missed opportunity, as most apps lacked interactive elements, such as user-generated content.

Sevin (2013) reinforced the idea that visuals are key to promoting tourism, particularly on social media platforms. He studied Idaho's Twitter campaign, as 5,582 tweets over a year were analyzed, and categorized them by content type to understand the effectiveness of visual-driven tweets in engaging followers. He found that visual tweets featuring natural landscapes and adventure activities effectively attracted eco-conscious tourists. However, the campaign focused more on broadcasting content than on interactive engagement. Unlike Fernandez-Cavia and Lopez's (2013) findings about the underutilization of mobile apps, Sevin's (2013) example showed how well-managed visual campaigns could successfully promote a destination's environmental responsibility. Both studies highlight the importance of visual engagement but differ in the effectiveness of the platforms discussed. Social media in Sevin's (2013) case appears

more successful in driving engagement than the mobile apps in Fernandez-Cavia and Lopez's (2013) study. Adamus-Matuszyńska et al (2021) added their own layer to this idea as they examined how logos communicate sustainability. Their analysis of 183 logos from Polish towns and counties revealed that 72% incorporated symbols of nature, such as trees and rivers, and 65% included cultural heritage icons, effectively conveying messages of ecological and cultural sustainability. This echoes the findings of both Fernandez-Cavia & Lopez (2013) and Sevin (2013) regarding the importance of visual elements. However, Adamus-Matuszyńska et al. (2021) point out a critical gap: while these logos effectively represent environmental values, they often overlook economic sustainability. They found that only 6.5% of logos included symbols related to local businesses, and even fewer incorporated indicators like sustainable tourist behavior or product diversity, limiting their ability to communicate a comprehensive sustainable development image. This contrasts with Fernandez-Cavia and Lopez's (2013) and Sevin's (2013) focus on promoting natural beauty and eco-tourism, as the logos failed to fully align with broader sustainability goals that include long-term economic strategies.

The Disconnect Between Visual Branding and Long-term Economic Sustainability

Strategies Despite the emphasis on environmental and cultural imagery in destination branding, there is often a disconnect between these visual elements and the long-term economic sustainability strategies of a destination. Adamus-Matuszyńska et al.(2021) argued that many visual branding strategies fail to adequately incorporate economic sustainability into their messaging. They elaborated that while the use of nature and cultural symbols is effective in promoting short-term eco-conscious engagement, these visuals may overlook the economic sustainability required to ensure the long-term viability of a destination.

Fernández-Cavia and López (2013) conducted an analysis of mobile applications from six Spanish destinations, evaluating how effectively these platforms integrated sustainable practices. They found that while features like geolocation maps and photo galleries showcased attractions, most apps lacked interactive tools and content related to sustainability, such as eco-tourism activities or local environmental initiatives. This lack of interactive features and forward-thinking economic strategies limited the apps' potential to convey a comprehensive, sustainable brand identity, representing a missed opportunity for destinations to engage travelers in a holistic commitment to sustainability (Fernández-Cavia & López 2013).

The research by Adamus-Matuszyńska et. al (2021) further emphasized that, although many logos and slogans effectively communicate ecological and cultural sustainability, they often fail to represent economic sustainability. This gap between visual representation and economic strategy can weaken the long-term impact of sustainable tourism branding. The overreliance on nature and cultural symbols without considering the economic dimensions may lead to a disconnect between the brand's visual identity and its sustainability goals.

Consumer Perceptions of Destination Branding for Sustainable Locations

Consumer perceptions play an immense role in shaping the effectiveness of destination branding, particularly in sustainable tourism (Garanti et. al, 2024). In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on aligning brand messaging with sustainable practices in order to build trust and gain long-term loyalty among eco-conscious travelers (Garanti et. al, 2024). Consumers seek destinations that both promote sustainability and exemplify genuine commitment to social and environmental responsibility through tangible actions (Garanti et. al, 2024). As destinations

shift toward sustainable development, the perceptions and experiences of travelers become central to brand success (Garanti et. al, 2024).

Building Consumer Trust and Loyalty through Authentic Sustainable Practices Forming a bond of trust and loyalty among consumers is crucial for destination brands that aim to promote sustainability. As travelers become more discerning, their perceptions of a brand's authenticity in terms of sustainable practices play a critical role in fostering long-term loyalty. Thelander and Cassinger (2017) highlighted the power of visual content, on platforms like Instagram. They found that non-professional, everyday photography, such as that used in the Instagram takeover project in Landskrona, Sweden, helped present more authentic and relatable images. This type of visual content builds trust by offering a genuine, less commercialized portrayal of the destination. Authenticity in visual branding can be a very powerful tool in engaging consumers (Thelander & Cassinger, 2017).

Authenticity in visual representation alone is good, but not enough. Day (2024), in a blog post about his book Sustainable Tourism and Responsible Travel, emphasized that consumers are increasingly influenced by their actual experiences rather than marketing messages. Day (2024) pointed out that Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) are now shifting their focus from just promoting sustainability to ensuring that their destinations provide sustainable experiences. This approach connects the visitor experience to the well-being of local communities and environmentally responsible practices, fostering deeper trust and loyalty among eco-conscious travelers. While Thelander and Cassinger's (2017) study emphasizes the role of authentic visuals, Day's (2024) blog post stretches this idea to actual operations, stressing that delivering sustainable experiences is key to maintaining consumer trust. Bobovnick (2010) complemented both perspectives by highlighting the importance of brand image in building loyalty. His study

examined the impact of perceived quality and brand image on visitor loyalty in the context of Slovakia's tourism industry. Utilizing quantitative data from the Czech Republic, the research employs Partial Least Squares (PLS) modeling to assess how satisfaction and brand image influence visitor loyalty. The findings indicated that a positive brand image significantly enhances visitor satisfaction and loyalty. Consumers are more likely to return and recommend destinations that maintain high standards of environmental responsibility (Bobovnický, 2010). On the other side of Thelander and Cassinger's (2017) focus on visual authenticity and Day's (2024) emphasis on experience, Bobovnický (2010) underscored that both visible and operational sustainability efforts are crucial in fostering loyalty. He demonstrated that a strong brand image, supported by authentic sustainable practices, is essential for long-term consumer engagement.

Shaping Positive Perceptions through Sustainable Development The integration of sustainable development into destination branding plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer perceptions, particularly for eco-conscious travelers. Miguez-Gonzalez and Fernandez-Cavia (2015) analyzed 87 official destination websites (ODWs) in Spain to evaluate their use of interactivity and social web features. Their findings showed that while ODWs have potential as platforms to engage eco-conscious travelers through elements like virtual tours and multimedia displays, most lacked features that encourage direct user interaction. For instance, only 11.8% of the analyzed Spanish city websites offered virtual tours, and few provided options for interactive videos or user-generated content, limiting their ability to convey an immersive experience.

Macaulay (2017), wrote an article for *The Nation*, discussing how framing sustainable tourism as part of a destination's economic development strategy can reshape consumer perceptions. While Miguez-Gonzalez and Fernandez-Cavia (2015) focused on the technological

tools that create immersive experiences, Macaulay (2017) emphasized the broader narrative. He suggested that when destinations integrate sustainability into their economic models, it positions them as responsible and forward-thinking. For example, in Nigeria, efforts to link sustainability with tourism development have shifted the country's image from traditional leisure tourism to one centered on responsible development. This approach appeals to travelers who seek destinations that respect both the environment and local communities, aligning with the global trend of eco-conscious tourism. In their systematic literature review, Garanti et. al (2024) analyzed 26 scholarly articles to assess the impact of sustainable place branding on visitor responses. Their findings indicate that destinations effectively communicating sustainability efforts experience enhanced perceived value among visitors. The study highlights that sustainable place branding positively influences destination image, trust, value, and loyalty. Additionally, it can lead to positive visitor outcomes, such as an increased intention to revisit and positive word-of-mouth recommendations. Like Miguez-Gonzalez and Fernandez-Cavia (2015), Garanti et. al (2024) highlighted the role of communication in shaping positive perceptions, but their focus extends to the long-term effects. Their systematic literature review revealed that destinations perceived as socially and environmentally responsible benefit from positive word-of-mouth and increased repeat visits. This showed how consistent communication of sustainable practices can strengthen a destination's brand image and reputation for long-term sustainability (Garanti et. al, 2024).

Tourist Impact in Sustainable Locations

The impact of tourism on sustainable locations has become a critical area of focus as destinations seek to balance the economic benefits of tourism with the need to protect

environmental and cultural integrity (Hunt 2023). While sustainable tourism practices aim to reduce the negative effects of mass tourism, challenges remain in managing tourism growth to ensure that local ecosystems and communities are not overwhelmed (Hunt 2023). Furthermore, eco-tourism presents an opportunity to promote environmental stewardship while mitigating pressure on natural resources (Commetric 2024). This section explores managing tourism growth to protect environmental and cultural integrity, and leveraging eco-tourism to promote stewardship and mitigate resource pressure.

Managing Tourism Growth to Protect Environmental and Cultural Integrity Managing the growth of tourism in sustainable locations requires balancing the attraction of visitors with the preservation of the destination's environmental and cultural heritage (Blain et. al, 2005). Blain et. al (2005) examined destination branding practices among Destination Management Organizations (DMOs). They conducted a survey of 210 DMO executives to assess their understanding and implementation of branding strategies, focusing on elements such as logo design, stakeholder involvement, and the perceived benefits of branding. They noted that while destination branding can effectively attract environmentally conscious tourists, it also risks contributing to over-tourism. This can strain local ecosystems and resources, jeopardizing the long-term sustainability of the destination. The key challenge is managing the influx of visitors so that tourism growth does not compromise the environment. Hunt (2023), in a blog post from Solimar International, emphasized the need to conserve natural resources while benefiting local communities. She stressed that exceeding a destination's environmental carrying capacity leads to significant degradation of ecosystems. Unlike Blain et. al (2005), who focused on the branding aspect, Hunt (2023) highlighted the importance of proper management practices, such as limiting

visitor numbers and promoting responsible tourism. These practices are crucial in protecting the environmental and cultural integrity of a destination.

Macaulay (2017) explored these kinds of challenges through the lens of Nigeria's tourism strategy. He pointed out that while tourism can drive economic growth, poor management can lead to resource depletion and environmental harm. To prevent this, Macaulay (2017) advocated for a business-oriented approach that incorporates sustainable practices. This strategy ensures that tourism development aligns with the long-term preservation of both the environment and cultural heritage. Macaulay's (2017) focus on business sustainability complements Hunt's call for responsible tourism by integrating economic and environmental goals. Konecnik and Gartner (2007) conducted a study applying the concept of customer-based brand equity (CBBE) to tourism destinations, focusing on Slovenia as a case. They developed a model with four core dimensions of awareness, image, quality, and loyalty to assess how tourists perceive destination brands. The study revealed that these dimensions contribute uniquely to brand equity, with image being a particularly influential factor. They argued that destinations with high-quality standards in cleanliness, infrastructure, and sustainability are more likely to attract repeat visitors and positive word-of-mouth. But, as more visitors arrive, the pressure on natural resources can increase. This connects to Blain et. al (2005) concerns about over-tourism, further accentuating the need for sustainable management practices to maintain the balance between tourism growth and resource preservation.

Leveraging Eco-tourism to Promote Stewardship and Mitigate Resource Pressure

Eco-tourism serves as a strong tool for promoting environmental stewardship and minimizing the negative impacts of traditional tourism. By encouraging responsible interaction with nature, eco-tourism can help reduce the strain on local ecosystems caused by increased visitor numbers.

Commetric (2024), a company of data analysts specializing in media analytics, explained that destinations that successfully integrate eco-tourism into their branding not only attract environmentally conscious travelers but also promote the conservation of natural landscapes. For example, India's focus on adventure tourism highlights the preservation of the Himalayas and major rivers, demonstrating how eco-tourism can foster both environmental stewardship and sustainable tourism growth.

Blain et. al (2005) surveyed 210 Destination Management Organization (DMO) executives in order to understand how DMOs perceive and implement branding strategies, focusing on elements such as logo design, stakeholder engagement, and the perceived benefits of branding. They explained that eco-tourism must be carefully planned to avoid contributing to the overuse of natural resources. While eco-tourism can help mitigate environmental impact, they stress that strong conservation policies and adequate infrastructure are essential for managing tourist activities effectively. This perspective highlights the risk that poorly managed eco-tourism efforts may inadvertently harm the very environments they aim to protect, adding a critical layer of complexity to eco-tourism strategies. Hunt's (2023) work discusses the impact of tourism on sustainable locations, focusing on the challenges of balancing tourism growth with environmental conservation. She emphasized the importance of collaboration between local communities and tourism authorities. She argued that involving local stakeholders not only generates economic benefits for communities but also encourages them to actively participate in conserving cultural and natural resources. This shared responsibility promotes a culture of stewardship, ensuring that eco-tourism supports long-term sustainability. Hunt's (2023) focus on community involvement adds a social dimension to eco-tourism, contrasting with Blain et. al (2005) emphasis on infrastructure and policy.

Macaulay (2017), in his article for *The Nation*, added another point of view by discussing the potential of eco-tourism in growing markets. He argued that eco-tourism provides a way to leverage natural resources without exhausting them, balancing business interests with environmental concerns. Macaulay's (2017) focus on the economic development potential of eco-tourism complements the environmental and community-focused perspectives of the other authors. By promoting eco-tourism, destinations in emerging markets can protect their natural assets while driving sustainable economic growth (Macaulay 2017).

Conclusion

Sustainable tourism and destination branding are essential strategies in today's eco-conscious market, allowing destinations to attract responsible travelers while emphasizing environmental stewardship and cultural preservation (Phung & Nguyen, 2023). By integrating sustainability through initiatives like eco-tourism, visual branding, and community involvement, destinations foster consumer trust and build long-term loyalty (Garanti et. al, 2024).

Balancing tourism growth with environmental and economic sustainability remains challenging. Effective management practices, authentic messaging, and the inclusion of economic dimensions in branding are essential to creating resilient brands that align with consumer values (Hunt, 2023 & Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005). As these sustainable practices evolve, destinations that prioritize both conservation and visitor engagement will be well-positioned to thrive, benefiting both travelers and local communities (Fernandez-Cavia & Lopez, 2013 & Sevin, 2013).

While past research covers strategies for introducing sustainable tourism branding, there is a noticeable gap concerning destinations that have already achieved notable success in

sustainable tourism marketing. Limited research examines how these destinations maintain their brand consistency over time, whether by adapting their strategies to evolving consumer expectations and environmental challenges or by adhering to foundational principles. Most studies focus on the initial implementation of sustainable practices and the associated impacts on brand perception and loyalty, but little attention is given to how established sustainable brands evolve to stay relevant and effective in a changing market. Future research could investigate how successful destinations balance consistency with adaptability in their branding, examining whether and how they modify their approaches to meet new sustainability standards, shifts in eco-conscious consumer behavior, or advancements in marketing technology. Understanding these long-term branding practices could provide valuable insights for destinations looking to build and sustain successful, resilient eco-friendly brands in the tourism industry.

While existing research explores broad consumer responses to sustainable branding, another gap is that there is limited study on how locals perceive the authenticity of sustainable tourism branding at specific, smaller destinations or local sites. Particularly, there is little analysis of how local residents perceive a destination's eco-friendly efforts and whether these perceptions align with the branding's claims of sustainability.

RQ: How do local community members view the branding's alignment with actual practices?

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