

Sustainable Marketing Framework for Strengthening Consumer Trust and Visit Intention in Kebumen Tourism

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Abstract

This conceptual study develops an integrative framework linking digital experience quality, AI-personalization, sustainability communication, and social proof to destination image and visit intention, mediated by consumer trust in technology. Anchored in sustainable marketing theory, the framework addresses the fragmented treatment of digital innovation and sustainability in tourism literature by uniting these dimensions into a cohesive structure. The study positions digital trust and sustainability narratives as pivotal elements in shaping tourists' behavioral intentions through trust-building and image enhancement mechanisms. Kebumen a newly recognized UNESCO Global Geopark in Central Java, serves as the contextual foundation, offering a unique blend of ecological, cultural, and digital potential that remains underrepresented in global tourism research. This context strengthens the theoretical novelty and practical relevance of the framework, particularly for emerging destinations seeking to balance innovation with authenticity. By proposing ten testable propositions and clarifying the mediating roles of digital trust and destination image, this paper contributes to theory-building in sustainable marketing and smart tourism. It further encourages empirical validation through structural equation modeling (SEM), comparative regional studies, and the application of digital tools for destination branding. The insights generated support destination managers and policymakers aiming to enhance competitiveness through integrated digital-sustainability strategies.

Keywords

Consumer Behavior, Sustainable marketing, Digital experience, Consumer trust, Destination image, Visit intention, Kebumen tourism

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Introduction

Kebumen Regency, located along the southern coast of Central Java, presents significant tourism potential due to its integration of natural landscapes and cultural heritage. The region's coastal landscapes, such as Logending Beach, together with conservation activities like the "Ronda Penyu" turtle patrol, highlight its unique blend of natural beauty and sustainable practices. Kebumen's recognition as part of the UNESCO Global Geopark in 2025 further underscores its positioning as a science-based and environmentally significant destination (Indonesiayouthfoundation.Org, 2025; Iki-Indonesia.Id, 2025). These characteristics mark Kebumen as an emerging tourism destination aligned with sustainability principles.

In the contemporary tourism landscape, digital engagement and consumer trust constitute fundamental pillars of effective destination marketing. Travelers increasingly rely on online platforms to search, plan, and book their trips, making digital interactions a decisive factor in shaping perceptions and decisions. Creating trust in these digital channels reduces perceived risk, fosters openness, and strengthens long-term relationships between destination marketing organizations and potential visitors. Studies emphasize that internet trust and engagement are critical for sustaining tourist relationships, as users demand security, transparency, and reliability from digital systems (Elshaer et al., 2024; Christou et al., 2025).

Although digital innovation and sustainable marketing have both received growing scholarly attention, existing studies often examine these areas in isolation. Much of the digital tourism literature focuses on engagement, personalization, and smart technologies, while sustainability research emphasizes green branding, environmental communication, or community-based initiatives. This fragmentation prevents a holistic understanding of how digital and sustainability constructs jointly shape tourist perceptions and behavior. Despite increasing calls for integrative frameworks that connect digital experiences with sustainability outcomes (Zeqiri et al., 2025), both conceptual and empirical responses remain limited. Moreover, sustainability branding studies rarely incorporate evolving digital consumer experiences (Christou et al., 2025). Thus, despite the growing relevance of both domains, few conceptual models explain how digital experience quality, AI-personalization, sustainability communication, and social proof collectively influence consumer trust, destination image, and ultimately visit intention—a critical gap this paper addresses.

Few studies have integrated digital trust and sustainable communication in one comprehensive model (Zeqiri et al., 2025; Christou et al., 2025) leaving a significant theoretical and practical gap in understanding how these dimensions interact to influence tourist behavior. Additionally, Kebumen—despite its unique combination of geological, cultural, and conservation-based tourism assets—has not been substantially discussed in international literature, making it an underexplored context within the global sustainable tourism discourse.

To address this need, the present study proposes a conceptual framework that integrates digital strategies and sustainable marketing to explain visit intention in emerging destinations such as Kebumen. By positioning digital experience quality, AI-personalization, sustainability communication, and social proof as antecedents, and consumer trust and destination image as mediators, the model provides a holistic structure for understanding visit intention. This

framework contributes to theoretical development in sustainable and digital tourism while offering practical insights for destination managers and policymakers seeking to strengthen competitiveness in an increasingly digital and sustainability-oriented tourism market.

Theoretical Foundation

Consumer Confidence in Technology: Contributions to Digital Tourism Behavior

In the last two years, a greater amount of literature has noted the central position of consumer trust in technologies of digital tourism conduct. For instance, Lee et al. (2025), developed a conceptualization and scale of “digital trust in hospitality and tourism,” as they noted that tourist decisions (e.g. booking, reviewing, or interacting with apps) depend heavily on perceptions of reliability, integrity, and tech competence of service platforms. Moreover, (Elshaer et al., 2024) studied the development of digital trust and rapport literature and found that digital trust implies safety, privacy, correct information, and fulfillment of given services; such trust creates higher satisfaction, loyalty, and willingness to communicate with service-providers by means of digital channels. Moreover, the article “Rethinking trust in tourism apps: the moderating effect of age” (Buvaneswari, 2024) illustrates that usefulness and ease of use of the tech generate trust beliefs (technological competence and benevolence), while trust mediates between such perceptions and behavioral intention towards interacting with the app.

Besides creating trust, more current work also began tracing the impact of trust in tech upon tourism behaviour. Nieves-Pavón et al. (2025) in the study entitled “Consumer technology risk and innovation on smart tourism destinations” sketches out that tourist adoption of tech is moderated by their risk perceptions; if trust levels are low, then high tech innovation will not yield behavioural uptake. Shariffuddin et al. (2023) on the “Navigating the tourism digital landscape” concludes that tourist tech-readiness (familiarity with tech) and affordances of online travel platforms raise the level of trust that then raises intention to use and buy travel by digital means. Thus, consumer trust in tech in digital tourism predicts not only usage intention but also mediates between tech features/risks upon behavioural outcomes.

Sustainable Marketing: Meaning and applicability in tourism.

Sustainable tourism marketing is broadly conceptualized in the literature as an approach that integrates economic, environmental, social, and cultural dimensions to ensure both current and future sustainability of tourism development. It extends beyond conventional “green” or “eco” marketing, advocating a holistic framework of environmental, social, and economic responsibility. For instance, Pahrudin et al. (2022) through a systematic review and bibliometric analysis, describe sustainable tourism marketing as an integration of destination branding, stakeholder advocacy, strategic communication, and tourism governance aimed at enhancing economic vitality, environmental protection, and socio-cultural well-being. Likewise, (Buvaneswari, 2024) emphasizes the necessity of embedding institutional structures, consumer behavior insights, regulatory frameworks, and business innovation to maximize sustainability outcomes in tourism.

Importance of sustainable marketing for tourism has strengthened over the last few years because of outside circumstances (environment destruction, climate change, public health crisis) as well as shifting consumer demands towards sustainability. Researchers have proved that tourism destinations/ firms that become sustainable marketing oriented enjoy richer destination image,

greater tourist satisfaction/ loyalty, greater stakeholder trust. For instance, Exploring sustainability oriented innovations in tourism (Aransyah et al., 2025) indicates that sustainability-related innovations—e.g., sustainability-related services that are environmentally friendly/ green-related goods offered by firms/ sustainability credentials transmitted—boost customer satisfaction/ loyalty that offer competitive advantages across tourism marketplaces. Online Besides that, a bibliometric analysis by Pahrudin et al. (2022) indicates that marketing towards sustainable tourism is not merely a normative/ ethical argument but is increasingly theorized by researchers/industry as essential towards sustainable economic long term stability/ local community well-being/ environment protection for tourism destinations.

Destination Image: How Perception Affects Visit Intention.

In newer tourism scholarship, destination image has repeatedly been shown to have a powerful impact on tourists' visit intention. In one such report recently made by Sabiote-Ortiz et al. (2024), for example, cognitive as well as affective components of destination image have been found by them to strongly predict visit intention at different levels of decision-making. In another recently carried out empirical study, Wang (2025) discusses the moderating effects of destination familiarity on destination image and travel intention relationship and finds that past experience as well as expertise of tourists with a place reinforce the favorable association of image with their visit intention. In a similar line of scholarship, Rodrigues et al. (2023) report on the manner digital marketing strengthens rural tourism image and its consequent behavioral visit intentions and argue that the digital revolution permits destinations to create more positive public images.

Besides direct effects, newer studies investigate mediating as well as moderating processes that image exercises on visit intention. Aboalghanam et al. (2025) test empirically that destination imagery (as a cognitive construct) intervenes between effects of user-generated content on visit intentions, evidencing that image works as a cognitive-affective filter amongst informational inputs and behavioral intention. Moreover, Anaya-Sánchez et al. (2024) conclude that immersive virtual reality experiences that aspire at mimicking destination attributes reinforce perceived destination image that raises intention to visit. Together, such newer findings suggest that destination image does not work merely linearly but does so by subtle channels conditioned by familiarity, mediated by mental imagery, and assisted by digital/immersive interfaces to produce an effect onto tourists' visit intention.

Conceptual Framework and Variable Relationships

Overview of Proposed Framework

Recent conceptual and empirical studies highlight the importance of integrative models in tourism that combine digital, experiential, and image-based variables. Confetto et al. (2023) propose a digital destination branding framework linking online strategies, informational cues, and stakeholder branding to shape image and competitiveness. Similarly, Christou et al. (2025) examine how social media affects destination image, travel intention, and engagement, calling for multi-level models that connect platform features, perceptions, and behaviors. Finally, Torres-Pruñonosa et al. (2024) further show that destination image research is increasingly integrative, merging cognitive, affective, and digital aspects to capture evolving perceptions.

Applying this logic, the proposed framework positions Digital Experience Quality, AI-Personalization, Sustainability Communication, and Social Proof 2.0 as antecedents influencing two mediators—Consumer Trust in Technology and Destination Image—which ultimately shape Visit Intention. Wang (2025) confirms that familiarity and image positively affect intention via mediated routes, while Frías-Jamilena et al., (2024) demonstrate that slow tourism image formation also drives behavioral outcomes. Together, these studies validate multi-faceted, mediated pathways. In Kebumen’s case, the framework illustrates how integrating digital engagement with sustainability communication enhances trust, strengthens image, and propels tourists’ choices toward the destination as a credible and sustainable option.

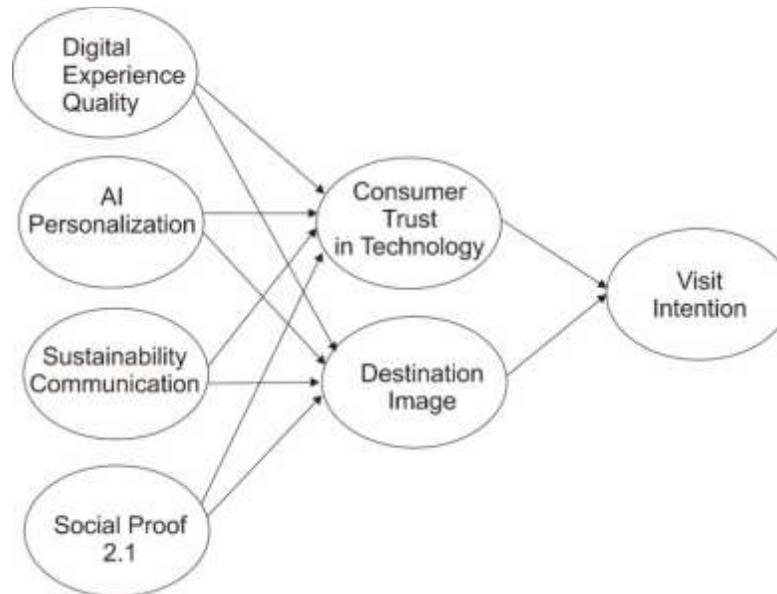


Figure 1.. Conceptual Model Integrating Digital and Sustainability Antecedents on Visit Intention

Explanation of constructs and relationships

The proposed framework positions Digital Experience Quality, AI-Personalization, Sustainability Communication, and Social Proof 2.0 as antecedents that influence Consumer Trust in Technology and Destination Image, with Visit Intention as the ultimate outcome. This structure highlights how digital and communicational variables interact to shape tourist perceptions and behavior. High-quality digital experiences—informative, interactive, and user-friendly—have been consistently linked with stronger consumer trust in tourism technologies. Evidence from tourism and hospitality research shows that features such as reliable and responsive interfaces reinforce positive evaluations and foster trust, while informativeness and interactivity are key cues for building digital trust and subsequent behaviors (Sustacha et al., 2023). Moreover, seamless digital experiences also project professionalism and reliability that enhance how tourists perceive the destination as a whole.

Proposition 1 (P1) : Digital Experience Quality positively influences Consumer Trust in Technology.

Proposition 2 (P2) : Digital Experience Quality positively influences Destination Image.

Similarly, personalization driven by AI strengthens consumer trust when travelers perceive recommendations as relevant, helpful, and respectful of privacy. Studies confirm that AI personalization enhances engagement and relevance, thereby bolstering trust (Koo et al., 2025). In tourism contexts, tailored trip proposals and live chat services increase perceived value and acceptance of AI systems, though transparency in data practices remains essential for sustaining trust (Hardcastle et al., 2025; Teepapal, 2025). Beyond trust, AI-personalized interactions also enhance tourists' impressions of the destination by making marketing communications more relevant and engaging.

Proposition 3 (P3): AI-Personalization positively influences Consumer Trust in Technology.

Proposition 4 (P4): AI-Personalization positively influences Destination Image.

In parallel, sustainability communication exerts a strong influence on destination image. Clear and credible messages about environmental stewardship, community value, and responsible practices can shape both cognitive and affective evaluations of a destination. For instance, Marchi et al. (2023) demonstrate how European tourism cities frame sustainability messages to impact perception, while Frías-Jamilena et al. (2024) show that co-created sustainability narratives strengthen authenticity and attractiveness, enhancing destination image.

Proposition 5 (P5) : Sustainability Communication positively influences Consumer Trust in Technology.

Proposition 6 (P6) : Sustainability Communication positively influences Destination Image.

Alongside sustainability, social proof in the form of user-generated content, community interactions, and influencer cues also plays a crucial role. Large-sample research confirms that exposure to peer-generated photos, reviews, and narratives shapes attitudes toward destinations (Guerreiro, Manuela et al., 2024), and studies further indicate that the perceived trustworthiness of UGC improves destination image before tourists make intention decisions (Aboalghanam et al., 2025).

Proposition 7 (P7) : Social Proof 2.0 positively influences Consumer Trust in Technology.

Proposition 8 (P8) : Social Proof 2.0 positively influences Destination Image.

Downstream, consumer trust in technology directly affects visit intention. When tourists believe in the reliability, safety, and competence of intelligent tourism technologies, they are more likely to use them for planning, payment, and on-site support. Reviews of digital trust in tourism suggest that it is a key determinant of adoption and subsequent behavioral intentions (Elshaer et al., 2024). Research on smart destinations further confirms that positive perceptions of technology translate into stronger visit intentions (Yap et al., 2025).

Proposition 9 (P9) : Consumer Trust in Technology positively influences Visit Intention.

Similarly, destination image remains one of the most established predictors of visit intention. Both cognitive attributes, such as quality and safety, and affective elements, such as excitement and

emotional connection, significantly influence intention at different stages of decision making. Recent studies show that positive images and emotional responses not only enhance satisfaction but also increase revisit and visit intentions in both domestic and international markets (Sabiote-Ortiz et al., 2024; Duan & Wu, 2024).

Proposition 10 (P10) : Destination Image positively influences Visit Intention.

Together, these associations demonstrate how the integration of digital experiences, AI personalization, sustainability communication, and social proof contributes to trust and image formation, which ultimately drive tourists' intention to visit.

Variable Descriptions

To clarify the conceptual framework, this section outlines the central variables that underpin the sustainable marketing model. Each construct represents a technological or perceptual factor shaping how tourists develop trust, evaluate destinations, and form behavioral intentions. By elaborating on these constructs, the framework provides a coherent structure that links digital interaction, sustainability communication, and social influence to strengthen visit intention toward Kebumen as a sustainable destination.

Digital Experience Quality

Digital Experience Quality refers to the extent to which a destination's digital touchpoints—such as websites, mobile apps, or kiosks—deliver seamless, intuitive, and user-friendly interactions. Platforms designed with smooth navigation, responsiveness, and coherent interaction patterns foster enjoyment, ease, and satisfaction, which are essential for trust formation (Youssofi et al., 2024). In smart tourism, real-time information, interactivity, personalization, and accessibility are crucial elements that improve tourists' evaluations of digital technologies (Hien & Trang (2024). Beyond aesthetics, digital experience quality reflects how well systems support user goals. Research shows that perceived ease of use and digital literacy predict trust and engagement (Xiong & Zhang, 2024), while advanced personalization tools such as recommendation engines enhance context-relevant experiences and perceived value (Chrysafiadi et al., 2025).

AI-Personalization

AI-Personalization describes the use of intelligent systems—powered by machine learning, predictive analytics, and deep learning—to tailor recommendations, content, and offers to individual preferences and behaviors. Studies demonstrate that AI-driven recommendations improve perceived relevance, diversity, and user engagement (Yin et al. 2025). In tourism, personalized AI interactions act as critical antecedents of trust in intelligent systems, influencing adoption and behavioral outcomes (Koo et al. 2025). Real-time, adaptive digital platforms enhance engagement and deeper interaction (Wu, 2025), while systematic reviews emphasize AI's role in both operational efficiency and service personalization (López Naranjo et al., 2025). Interactions with AI tools such as chatbots and recommendation systems further strengthen emotional engagement, trust, and loyalty, especially when designed with transparency and ethical standards (Ferhataj & Memaj, 2025).

Sustainability Communication

Sustainability communication refers to the transparent disclosure of a destination's environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices with the aim of building credibility and trust. In tourism, effective sustainability messaging—such as information on carbon reduction, waste management, or community involvement—reduces information asymmetry and assures travelers of the authenticity of such claims (Bernard et al., 2024). Tourists respond more positively when communications are clear, precise, and provide rationale alongside implementation details. Marchi et al. (2023), for example, show that European tourism cities presenting balanced sustainability content across environmental, socio-cultural, and economic domains are perceived as more trustworthy. With growing skepticism toward “greenwashing,” credible communication becomes critical. Bhattacharyya et al. (2024) highlight that authentic framing of sustainability performance can significantly affect behavioral intentions, while Chang et al. (2025) find that eco-conscious travelers are more likely to trust destinations when specific initiatives—such as biodiversity protection or energy conservation—are clearly articulated. Taken together, these findings position sustainability communication as a strategic tool that signals authenticity, enhances trust, and supports tourists' intention to engage with sustainable destinations.

Social Proof 2.0

In digital tourism, Social Proof 2.0 captures the influence of eWOM, peer reviews, and influencer credibility in shaping destination perceptions and decisions. Unlike traditional testimonials, this form thrives on real-time user-generated content that signals authenticity and social validation. Research confirms that influencers act as key opinion leaders whose credibility and engagement significantly affect travel intentions (Saini et al., 2023). Complementing this, a systematic review by Iswanto et al. (2024) underscores how both peer reviews and influencer endorsements reduce uncertainty, strengthen trust, and legitimize tourism offerings, recommending their integration into marketing strategies. Broader reviews also stress the roles of source credibility, expertise, and trustworthiness in driving consumer responses to social signals. De Mel (2022) identifies these variables as consistent drivers of engagement, while Spörl-Wang et al. (2025) show that social proof mechanisms reduce perceived risk and build consensus, ultimately influencing attitudes and intentions. Within tourism, Social Proof 2.0 therefore functions as an active driver of image formation and decision-making, reinforcing its importance in frameworks linking digital engagement to visit intention.

Consumer Trust in Technology

Consumer trust in technology reflects the degree of confidence users place in digital systems to function reliably, deliver accurate information, and operate transparently. Trust is grounded in two main dimensions: reliability—systems performing consistently without failure—and transparency, which involves clarity in data processing and decision-making. Glassberg et al. (2025) show that design clarity and transparency enhance user trust in AI-driven platforms, while Oesterreich et al. (2024) emphasize that perceived reliability and openness are strong antecedents of digital trust. Beyond technical aspects, digital trust is increasingly conceptualized as multidimensional, encompassing technical, procedural, and relational elements. Saveljeva & Volkova (2025) highlight integrity, data security, and ethical management as central to trust in digital environments. In tourism, trust is crucial for adoption and continued use of technology. Lee et al. (2025), distinguish between mechanical trust, linked to responsiveness and efficiency, and

relational trust, tied to credibility and care, showing both dimensions positively influence ongoing use of tourism technologies.

Destination Image

Destination image refers to tourists' internal representations of a place, combining cognitive impressions—beliefs and evaluations of attributes—and affective impressions—emotional responses to the destination. In Kebumen, the cognitive dimension might involve natural features (beaches, hills, rivers), infrastructure (accessibility, accommodations), and environmental quality. Trang et al. (2023) demonstrate that sensory cues such as visuals, sounds, and scents enrich these impressions, strengthening both cognitive and affective evaluations. Social media also plays a vital role: Vlassi et al. (2024) show that user-generated content blends objective attributes with subjective emotions, shaping a holistic destination image. On the affective side, emotions such as tranquility, excitement, or nostalgia influence how cognitive assessments translate into behaviors like loyalty and revisit intentions. Yang et al. (2022) confirm that affect often mediates or moderates the relationship between evaluations and outcomes. Furthermore, integrated models are more predictive: Woosnam et al. (2020) find that emotional solidarity and affective connection enhance conative image—destination-driven motivation—beyond what cognitive evaluations alone explain. Collectively, these insights highlight destination image as a multidimensional construct central to shaping tourists' trust, loyalty, and intention to visit destinations such as Kebumen.

Visit Intention

Visit intention is a core construct in tourism research, capturing the degree to which prospective tourists are likely to choose a destination in the future. It functions as a bridge between perception and actual behavior, shaped by both cognitive and affective elements of destination image. Sabiote-Ortiz et al. (2024) demonstrate that these components significantly influence visit intention across decision stages, while Guo et al., (2024) show how different advertising formats affect image and, in turn, tourists' likelihood to visit. These findings underscore the anticipatory and motivational dimensions of visit intention.

Within the proposed framework, visit intention is defined as the likelihood of tourists choosing Kebumen, shaped by mediators such as consumer trust in technology and destination image. Trust in secure and reliable digital systems plays a central role, as tourists who view technologies as competent are more inclined to make travel-related decisions, including booking and destination selection. While direct empirical studies in tourism remain limited, broader evidence confirms this relationship. Nadee et al. (2024) , for instance, find that interactivity, personalization, and perceived digital self-efficacy—factors closely tied to digital trust—positively influence intention in smart tourism contexts. Thus, visit intention represents the culminating outcome of the framework, showing how technological trust and positive image translate into concrete intentions to travel, positioning Kebumen as a sustainable and attractive destination.

Research Implication

Tourism destination managers in Kebumen are advised to strategically incorporate digital technologies into destination marketing and management, transcending traditional promotional practices. High-quality digital interfaces and AI-driven personalization platforms can enable intelligent systems that deliver tailored content, seamless navigation, and enhanced user satisfaction—thereby strengthening consumer trust and visit intention. For example, eco-conscious mobile applications that offer real-time updates and customized itineraries may increase user engagement while highlighting Kebumen’s digital readiness and environmental commitment. Concurrently, transparent sustainability communication and credible social proof—such as user-generated content and authentic storytelling—are critical to reinforcing destination credibility and projecting a sustainability-oriented image.

From a strategic marketing perspective, the synergy between AI-driven personalization and social proof offers a high-impact approach to building trust and elevating destination image. Peer reviews, influencer endorsements, and customized content reduce perceived uncertainty and improve message relevance. These tools, when integrated effectively, amplify authentic voices and improve the overall tourist experience, positioning Kebumen as both sustainable and technologically progressive.

For academic researchers, the proposed conceptual framework provides a robust foundation for empirical validation. It facilitates the examination of causal relationships, mediating mechanisms, and contextual moderations between key constructs in digital and sustainable tourism. Methodologically, it supports the application of advanced analytical techniques such as SEM, PLS-SEM, and fsQCA. Future cross-regional comparative studies can further assess the generalizability of the framework. Empirical testing of this model may not only enhance theoretical development but also yield actionable insights for practitioners aiming to improve destination competitiveness through digital-sustainability integration.

Conclusion

This study introduces a conceptual framework that integrates digital experience quality, AI-personalization, sustainability communication, and social proof to explain visit intention, with consumer trust in technology and destination image as mediators. By aligning digital innovation with sustainable marketing principles, the framework highlights how emerging destinations like Kebumen can build trust, reinforce a positive image, and strengthen competitiveness in a sustainability-conscious tourism landscape. Given its conceptual nature, future research is needed to empirically test the model first in Kebumen, and then in other emerging destinations. Such validation will not only refine the theoretical model but also generate practical insights for policymakers and practitioners aiming to balance technological advancement with environmental and cultural authenticity in destination development.

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