

Understanding Sustainable Travel Choices through the Value-Belief-Norm Theory: Implications for Tourism SMEs

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Abstract: This study examines how travelers' sustainability-related values influence responsible tourism choices. The objective of this study is to investigate how the perceived importance of sustainability predicts tourists' responsible travel choices and to provide insights for tourism entrepreneurs and SMEs on how to respond to travelers' value-driven preferences. The research builds on the Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory (Stern et al, 1999). The study explores how sustainability values shape responsible travel behavior in the context of domestic tourism in Finland. The data were collected through the South Ostrobothnia Tourist Survey 2024, conducted by Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences and the University of Helsinki Ruralia Institute. The final sample includes 526 respondents. Two dimensions of sustainability importance, environmental and socio-cultural, were measured using validated multi-item scales, and logistic regression analyses were used to assess their relationships with responsible travel choices. The results show that environmental sustainability has a stronger positive association with responsible travel choices ($\text{Exp}(B)=1.70$, $p<.001$) than socio-cultural sustainability ($\text{Exp}(B)=1.49$, $p=.003$). This indicates that while tourists value both dimensions, environmental aspects are more visible and therefore more influential in their decision-making. However, the significance of the socio-cultural dimension suggests untapped potential: tourists may not yet recognize its importance, but businesses can enhance its impact through clearer communication about local employment, cultural heritage, and community collaboration. The study extends the VBN framework to a broader sustainability context and contributes to the entrepreneurship and tourism literature by offering actionable insights for tourism SMEs. Strengthening the visibility of socio-cultural sustainability can help firms differentiate their services, communicate authentic local value, and align business strategies with travelers' evolving ethical expectations.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism, Environmental Sustainability, Socio-cultural Sustainability, Value-Belief-Norm Theory, Tourism SMEs

1. Introduction

The objective of this study is to investigate how the perceived importance of sustainability predicts tourists' responsible travel choices and to provide insights for tourism entrepreneurs and SMEs on how to respond to travelers' value-driven preferences. By identifying which sustainability dimensions most strongly influence travel decisions, the research offers guidance on how companies can design and communicate their services more effectively.

The theoretical foundation of this research is based on the Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory (Stern et al, 1999), which provides a framework for understanding how personal values and moral norms influence individuals' environmentally responsible behavior. In the context of sustainable tourism, the VBN theory helps to explain why some travelers consider sustainability aspects when making travel-related decisions. It suggests that individuals' fundamental values, such as altruistic or biospheric values, shape their beliefs about environmental and social consequences and their perceived personal responsibility to act. When these beliefs are activated, they foster moral obligations that guide behavior consistent with sustainability principles. Applying this framework enables the present study to investigate how travelers' sustainability-related values affect their choices of responsible tourism services from both environmental and socio-cultural perspectives.

According to UN Tourism (n.d.), sustainable tourism comprises environmental, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions, and its principles are applicable across all forms of tourism and all types of tourist destinations. Achieving sustainability in tourism development requires establishing and a suitable balance among these dimensions to ensure long-term sustainability. The environmental dimension emphasizes the optimal use of environmental resources, with the aim of maintaining essential ecological processes and supporting the conservation of natural heritage and biodiversity. The socio-cultural dimension underscores the importance of respecting the authenticity of host communities, conserve both built and living cultural heritage, and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance. The economic dimension focuses on securing viable and equitable long-term operating conditions for all stakeholders, ensuring that the benefits of tourism are distributed fairly. Sustainable tourism development also extends to tourists themselves, aiming to

enhance their awareness of sustainability issues and to encourage the adoption of responsible tourism practices. Furthermore, sustainable tourism seeks to maintain high levels of tourist satisfaction and to provide meaningful and enriching experiences.

Data from the South Ostrobothnia Tourist Survey 2024 (n = 526), conducted in Finland, were analyzed using logistic regression analysis to examine how the importance of environmental and socio-cultural sustainability influences responsible travel choices.

This research makes several contributions. First, it extends VBN theory in the tourism context by incorporating a social dimension into the framework. Sustainable tourism research has predominantly focused on environmental aspects while socially sustainable tourism has received considerably less attention (Baena and Cerviño, 2024). This study addresses this gap by responding to the need for concrete actions that enable tourism SMEs to make their socially responsible practices more visible to tourists.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Value-Belief-Norm Theory

The Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory, developed by Stern et al (1999), offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how individual values and moral norms shape in particular pro-environmental behavior. The theory posits a causal chain in which values influence beliefs, which in turn activate personal norms that ultimately guide behavior.

When individuals recognize that their personal values are under threat and believe they can take meaningful action to protect those values, a sense of moral obligation to act is activated. This personal norm motivates behaviors aligned with those values. In this way, VBN theory links internal cognitive and moral processes to observable behavioral outcomes. Individuals who share the values of the environmental movement typically experience a moral responsibility to act; however, the specific behaviors adopted, such as environmentally friendly consumption, are also influenced by factors beyond the personal domain (Stern et al, 1999).

In this study, the VBN framework is applied to explore how travelers' sustainability-related values and beliefs translate into responsible tourism behavior. More specifically, it examines whether the perceived importance of environmental and socio-cultural sustainability affects tourists' likelihood of selecting responsible tourism services. Following the logic of the VBN theory, travelers who place greater importance on sustainability-related values are expected to experience stronger moral obligations, which in turn increase the probability of choosing sustainable and responsible travel options. In this study, the VBN framework is used as a theoretical lens to explain sustainability-related travel choices, rather than to test the full value-belief-norm causal chain.

2.2 Sustainable Tourism Research

Research on sustainable tourism has primarily focused on environmental aspects (Li et al, 2024), while also addressing socio-cultural dimensions such as the preservation of cultural heritage (Geçikli et al, 2024). However, the integration of these perspectives has received comparatively little attention. Furthermore, there is a notable lack of studies conducted in Finland, particularly in regions where Finnish travelers are the main visitors. Further research is needed to understand tourists' sustainability behavior, particularly how their sustainability-related values influence their choices of responsible tourism services.

Aziz et al (2025) found that tourists' environmentally responsible behavior is shaped by green destination brand equity, which includes green destination awareness, green destination image, green destination quality, and green destination loyalty. Gomes and Lopez (2023) state that access to information on a destination's sustainability positively influences the adoption of sustainable travel habits and steers traveler behavior toward more sustainable practices.

Su et al (2017) found that customers perceived positive emotions strengthen customer-company identification, which together partially mediate the link between perceived corporate social responsibility and green consumer behavior. Furthermore the results showed that positive emotions and customer-company identification are partly associated with sustainable consumption behavior.

Previous studies examining the VBN theory in the context of tourism sustainability have mainly focused on environmental perspectives (Li et al, 2024; Thuy et al, 2025; Alashiq and Aljuhmani, 2025), such as tourists' intentions to visit green hotels (Waris et al, 2024) and tourists' behavioral intentions (Yan and Chai, 2021). Recent

research has expanded this view by incorporating cultural, informational, and social dimensions. Thuy et al (2025) emphasized the role of Vietnam's collectivist culture, showing that cultural norms amplify the normative consequences of sustainable behavior and highlight rational, normative, and contextual drivers.

Waris et al (2024) demonstrated that egoistic values most strongly influence pro-environmental beliefs which, together with information publicity, shape personal norms and intentions to visit green hotels. Similarly, Alashiq and Aljuhmani (2025) examined social engagement as a norm-driven outcome, showing that tourism sustainability fosters social participation through environmental knowledge and destination image as key mediators. Yan and Chai (2021) reported that environmental concern and perceived influence positively affect behavioral intentions, while price has a negative effect. Fauzi et al (2024) identified subjective norms and perceived behavioral control as the main drivers of intentions to stay at green hotels, whereas green trust and personal norms showed no significant effect. To support industry development, further research is needed to understand tourist consumption behavior and assess the effectiveness of sustainability actions.

2.3 Sustainable Tourism in Finland

The Region of South Ostrobothnia is located in Western Finland with a population of 195 000 residents. Tourism in South Ostrobothnia is predominantly rural tourism. A characteristic feature is that tourism typically functions as a supplementary source of income, and the sector is largely characterized by its seasonal nature. The region's visitor base is composed almost exclusively of domestic tourists. Compared to Finland's most known travel destinations, such as Lapland and Helsinki, the tourism sector in South Ostrobothnia has not developed to the same level of professionalisation, and significantly fewer resources are allocated to tourism. Although tourism in the region relies primarily on domestic visitors, South Ostrobothnia holds considerable growth potential in international markets as well. The region is known for its high-quality family tourism attractions and diverse events. South Ostrobothnia is home to two Geoparks with UNESCO status, and its cultural offering is rich, with Alvar Aalto's architecture standing out as the most internationally recognised element.

In Finland, the promotion of sustainability within the tourism sector is guided by national strategies and policy documents that steer the development of the industry. Finland's Tourism Strategy and measures for 2025–2028 defines a set of measures aimed at establishing Finland as the most sustainably growing tourism destination in the Nordic region by 2028 and the tourism industry should demonstrate strong competence and capability in sustainability management (Kyyrä, 2025). According to the Finland's Food Tourism Strategy for 2024–2028 strategy, a key strategic priority is advancing responsible business practices in the food tourism sector by systematically integrating sustainability across operations, resource use, and communication (Laamanen et al, 2024).

Finland's official tourism promotion organization Visit Finland's task is to promote Finland as an interesting destination for international tourists. Visit Finland enhances the attractiveness of Finnish tourism through several thematic focus areas, including nature, culture, wellness, education, and food tourism, with sustainability systematically integrated across all themes (Visit Finland, n.d.-a). The strategic objective is to position Finland as a leading destination for sustainable tourism and as the first choice for the conscious traveller (Visit Finland, 2025). To support this objective, Visit Finland has developed the Sustainable Travel Finland programme in line with international standards to promote sustainability in tourism and support the sector's long-term viability. Upon meeting the programme criteria, enterprises and destinations are awarded the Sustainable Travel Finland label, which serves as a communication tool to signal comprehensive sustainable practices to tourists (Visit Finland, n.d.-b).

Halminen and García-Rosell (2022) noted that programs such as the Sustainable Travel Finland process, which help firms implement sustainability measures, are essential for supporting tourism companies in adopting sustainability practices, as each firm follows a unique learning path and must continuously develop its sustainability efforts. Sorakunnas et al (2024) examined Visit Finland's Sustainable Travel Finland program and its potential to enhance the Finnish tourism industry's resilience in terms of sustainability. Through the program, the Finnish tourism industry receives support and proactive guidance in responding to the demands of sustainability.

3. Data and Method

3.1 Data Collection

The data for the South Ostrobothnia Tourist Survey 2024 were collected by Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences in collaboration with the University of Helsinki Ruralia Institute in Finland. Data collection was conducted in two phases using the same structured questionnaire. In the first phase, data were gathered from tourists through face-to-face interviews and self-administered questionnaires distributed by local tourism companies. This phase focused on collecting background information, including demographic variables, travel destination, purpose and duration of the trip, and the respondents' relationship with the destination area. A total of 1,374 responses were obtained in this phase. In the second phase, a follow-up survey was conducted after the trip to capture tourists' experiences, service use, and the perceived importance of sustainability when choosing tourism destinations. A total of 680 respondents participated in the follow-up survey; however, only 526 respondents provided complete answers to the items related to all study variables, and these responses constitute the dataset used in the present analysis.

In this study, we investigate the extent to which the perceived importance of sustainability influences travelers' responsible travel choices. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the respondents. A majority were women (75%), while 25% were men. With respect to age distribution, 3% were younger than 25 years, 13% were between 25 and 34 years, 34% were 35–49 years, 29% were 50–64 years, and 22% were 65 years or older.

Table 1: Demographics of the respondents.

Gender	N (%)
Woman	395 (75%)
Man	131 (25%)
Age	N (%)
Under 25 years	13 (2,5%)
25 – 34 years	66 (12,5%)
35 – 49 years	180 (34,2%)
50 – 64 years	152 (28,9%)
65 years or older	115 (21,9%)

3.2 Variables and Reliability

Variables, items, and factor loadings, along with Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR) values, are presented in Table 2. Dependent variable was responsible travel choice, and it was measured with the question: *“How much did responsible tourism services influence your decision to take your trip to South Ostrobothnia?”*. The dependent variable captures whether responsible tourism services influenced the travel decision and therefore reflects a self-reported responsible travel choice. Responses were given on a five-point scale (1 = did not influence at all, 5 = influenced decisively). For further analysis, the variable was dichotomized: responses 1–2 were coded as 0 (indicating no influence), and responses 3–5 as 1 (indicating influence).

The independent variable, sustainability importance as a value, was measured from two dimensions, environmental and socio-cultural, drawing on the framework developed by Li et al (2022). Respondents were asked to rate the importance of various sustainability aspects when travelling on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (= not important at all) to 5 (= very important).

The four items measuring environmental sustainability importance loaded onto a single factor, with loadings ranging from 0.753 to 0.936. The factor demonstrated good internal consistency (CR = 0.91) and acceptable convergent validity (AVE = 0.72). Socio-cultural sustainability importance was measured with five items, which also formed a single factor. Factor loadings ranged from 0.677 to 0.769, with good internal consistency (CR = 0.81) and acceptable convergent validity (AVE = 0.65).

Table 2: Variables, items, factor loadings, average variance extracted and composite reliability.

Variable and Items	Factor Loadings	AVE	CR
Environmental Sustainability Importance			
The tourism service is environmentally friendly	.821	.72	.91
The tourism company uses renewable energy sources in its operations	.936		
The tourism company has measures in place to reduce water consumption	.875		
The tourism company or area is certified, meaning it has, for example, an eco-label	.753		
Socio-cultural Sustainability Importance			
The tourism company employs local people	.677	.65	.81
The tourism company informs its customers about nature and local culture	.702		
Visitors have the opportunity to eat local food at businesses in the destination	.743		
The tourism company plans its operations together with local residents	.769		
The destination offers opportunities to experience local culture and traditional landscapes	.706		

Control variables included age (continuous) and gender (coded one for male and zero for female).

Binary logistic regression was used to examine whether sustainability-related attitudes predict the likelihood that respondents selected their trip based on responsible tourism services. The dependent variable was dichotomous (0 = no, 1 = yes), and the predictors included gender, age, and perceived importance of socio-cultural and environmental sustainability.

The assumptions for logistic regression were evaluated and found to be generally satisfied. The outcome variable was binary, observations were independent, and predictors were appropriately coded as continuous or dummy variables. Linearity in the logit for continuous predictors was assumed based on theoretical justification and preparatory diagnostics (Hilbe, 2009; Menard, 2010). To assess multicollinearity, variance inflation factors (VIFs) were calculated for each predictor.

The values indicate that multicollinearity is not a concern for the gender variable (VIF=1.41), and only moderately elevated for age (VIF=8.50). However, the two sustainability dimensions show very high VIFs, reflecting a strong intercorrelation ($r \approx .88$). This is expected as these variables reflect different dimensions of sustainability. However, this level of collinearity inflates the standard errors of the regression coefficients and complicates interpretation when both dimensions are included in the same model.

To address this issue, two separate logistic regression models were estimated: one with environmental sustainability as the sole predictor, and another with socio-cultural sustainability alone. This approach allowed clearer assessment of each dimension's individual contribution to responsible tourism choices, while avoiding the interpretive limitations caused by multicollinearity.

4. Results

Two separate binary logistic regression models were estimated to assess the relationship between sustainability attitudes and the likelihood that respondents selected their trip based on responsible tourism services. Each model included age, gender, and one sustainability dimension (either environmental or socio-cultural importance). A total of 526 cases were included in both analyses.

4.1 Responsible Travel Choice and Environmental Sustainability

The first model included age, gender, and the perceived importance of environmental sustainability. The model was statistically significant overall ($\chi^2(3) = 25.551, p < .001$), indicating that the predictors collectively improved the fit compared to the intercept-only model. The explanatory power of the model was modest, with Cox & Snell $R^2 = 0.047$ and Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.071$.

Table 3: Model for responsible travel choice; independent variable the importance of environmental sustainability.

Variables in the Equation						
	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Age	.012	.007	2.843	1	.092	1.012
Gender	.229	.252	.829	1	.363	1.258
Importance of environmental sustainability	.531	.122	19.049	1	<.001	1.700
Constant	-3.586	.558	41.306	1	<.001	.028

Among the predictors, only environmental sustainability reached statistical significance. The coefficient for environmental importance was $B = 0.531$ ($SE = 0.122$), with a Wald statistic of 19.049 and $p < .001$. The corresponding odds ratio ($Exp(B) = 1.700$) indicates that for each one-unit increase in perceived environmental sustainability importance, the odds of selecting a trip based on responsible tourism increased by approximately 70%.

Age exhibited a positive but non-significant association with responsible travel choices ($B = 0.012$, $SE = 0.007$, $p = .092$), suggesting that older respondents tended to be somewhat more likely to make responsible decisions. Gender did not emerge as a significant predictor ($B = 0.229$, $SE = 0.252$, $p = .363$).

4.2 Responsible Travel Choice and Socio-cultural Sustainability

The second model included age, gender, and the perceived importance of socio-cultural sustainability. This model was also statistically significant ($\chi^2(3) = 14.290$, $p = .003$), though its explanatory power was slightly lower than the first model (Cox & Snell $R^2 = 0.027$; Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.040$).

Table 4: Model for responsible travel choice; independent variable the importance of socio-cultural sustainability.

Variables in the Equation						
	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Age	.015	.007	4.278	1	.039	1.015
Gender	.071	.245	.084	1	.771	1.074
Importance of socio-cultural sustainability	.401	.136	8.751	1	.003	1.493
Constant	-3.357	.628	28.534	1	<.001	.035

In this model, socio-cultural sustainability was a statistically significant predictor of responsible travel choices. The coefficient for socio-cultural importance was $B = 0.401$ ($SE = 0.136$), with a Wald statistic of 8.751 and $p = .003$. The corresponding odds ratio ($Exp(B) = 1.493$) indicates that for each one-unit increase in perceived socio-cultural sustainability importance, the odds of selecting a trip based on responsible tourism increased by approximately 49%.

Age was also a significant predictor in this model ($B = 0.015$, $SE = 0.007$, $p = .039$), with an odds ratio of $Exp(B) = 1.015$, suggesting a small but statistically significant increase in the likelihood of responsible choices with age. Gender remained non-significant ($B = 0.071$, $SE = 0.245$, $p = .771$).

4.3 Classification Accuracy

In both models, the classification tables showed that the fitted equations predicted only the “no” category (i.e., that responsibility was not a selection criterion). As a result, the models correctly classified 100% of the “no” responses and 0% of the “yes” responses, yielding an overall classification accuracy of 75.7%. This outcome reflects the imbalance in the dependent variable, as only about 24% ($N = 128$) of respondents reported that they had chosen their trip based on responsible tourism services. Such imbalance naturally limits the discriminative power of the predictors in their current form.

Although the logistic regression models were statistically significant, their overall explanatory power was modest, and they failed to correctly classify any respondents who reported choosing their trip based on responsible tourism. This limitation highlights a common challenge in behavioral research; the gap between expressed attitudes and actual behavior.

Despite this, the models still provide meaningful insights. The results suggest that environmental sustainability shows a stronger and more consistent association with responsible travel choices than socio-cultural sustainability. This may reflect the fact that environmental actions and credentials are more visible and easier for travellers to recognize and act upon through eco-labels, green certifications, or marketing messages. In contrast, socio-cultural sustainability may be perceived as more abstract or less directly connected to the consumer experience, making it harder to translate into concrete decisions.

The inability of the models to accurately classify behaviour does not invalidate the findings. Instead, it underscores the complexity of consumer decision-making. Attitudes alone are not sufficient to predict behaviour; other factors such as price, convenience, habits, social norms, and the availability of clear information likely play significant roles. This suggests that sustainability communication must go beyond raising awareness—it must also make responsible choices easy, visible, and actionable.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined how travelers' sustainability-related values influence responsible tourism choices, drawing on the VBN theory (Stern et al, 1999) as the main theoretical framework. The findings are discussed in relation to the VBN framework and prior research on sustainable tourism behavior.

The results provide partial support for the VBN theory, which suggests that individual values and beliefs shape moral norms that guide pro-environmental behavior. In line with this framework, a higher perceived importance of environmental sustainability increased the likelihood of choosing responsible tourism services. However, the modest explanatory power of the models and the relatively small proportion of respondents (24%) reporting such choices indicate that sustainability-related values do not automatically translate into behavior. This reflects the well-documented attitude-behavior gap (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1977), suggesting that VBN alone does not fully explain responsible tourism choices. Contextual factors such as price sensitivity, availability, and the visibility of sustainability practices also play a significant role. Overall, the findings point to a partial alignment between values and behavior, particularly with regard to environmental sustainability, and highlight the importance of effective sustainability communication by tourism providers. Nevertheless, other factors, most notably price, may outweigh sustainability considerations in travel decision-making, especially when travelers place limited value on environmental or socio-cultural sustainability.

Importantly, the results extend the application of the VBN framework by demonstrating that socio-cultural sustainability also plays a significant, albeit weaker, role in shaping responsible travel choices. This suggests that moral responsibility may be driven not only by biospheric and altruistic values but also by cultural and community-related considerations. Integrating these dimensions into the VBN framework could enrich our understanding of how diverse sustainability values influence consumer behavior in tourism.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research, confirming that open information about destinations' green actions shapes intentions to visit green hotels (Waris et al, 2024). Accordingly, when destinations actively share information about their green activities, travelers are more likely to choose sustainable destinations. In addition, this study indicates that other factors may have a stronger influence than sustainability values on destination choice, which is consistent with the findings of Yan and Chai (2022).

As a practical implication of this study, it can be noted that environmental sustainability actions may be more easily understood by travelers, whereas socially sustainable actions can be less clear. Sustainability communication often focuses primarily on environmental values, such as recycling and energy consumption. This suggests that tourism SMEs should pay greater attention to the visibility of their socially responsible actions, enabling travelers to make decisions also based on social sustainability considerations. The sustainability-related actions that travelers value are often everyday practices that companies already implement in their operations, but do not communicate openly enough to travelers. Companies should communicate responsibility from different perspectives.

In general, travelers are interested in local culture, people, and ways of life. Responsibility can be communicated more broadly by explaining, for example, what kind of cooperation the company has with local residents and communities. Companies can also highlight whether they employ local people and use local products and service

providers. It is equally important to communicate the region's culture and traditions and to incorporate them into product development and service design. Communication should also explain why certain actions are important and why specific sustainability choices have been made. In sustainability communication, it is essential to consider the entire customer journey, from travel planning to post-trip marketing.

This study has some limitations. The data were collected in a single country and included only Finnish travelers. Therefore, future research should examine whether the results can be replicated in other countries and contexts. Despite these limitations, the study provides insights into sustainable tourism research within the VBN context and contributes to a better understanding of socially responsible tourism research.

Ethics Declaration

Ethical clearance was not required for the research.

AI Declaration

AI tools (Microsoft Copilot and ChatGPT) were used solely for language editing and proofreading of the manuscript.

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