

Which Sustainability Pillar Do Visitors Experience? Triple Bottom Line, Tourist Experience and Satisfaction in the Maldives

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines which pillars of the triple bottom line (TBL) visitors experience in a small island resort destination, and whether the tourist experience transmits their effect to tourist satisfaction.

Design/methodology/approach – Integrating TBL with expectation-disconfirmation theory (EDT), the study surveyed 400 international tourists who had stayed in Maldivian resorts. Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM), bootstrapped mediation analysis and importance–performance map analysis (IPMA) were applied.

Findings – Environmental sustainability ($\beta = 0.496$) and social sustainability ($\beta = 0.377$) had significant positive effects on the tourist experience; economic sustainability had none. The tourist experiences increased satisfaction ($\beta = 0.306$) and mediated the effects of the environmental and social pillars. The model explained 75.8% of the variance in experience and 69.7% in satisfaction. IPMA identified environmental sustainability as the highest-priority lever.

Research limitations/implications – The pillars are not interchangeable from the visitor's perspective: sustainability creates satisfaction only when it is visible within the experience. High inter-construct correlations and single-source cross-sectional data call for cautious interpretation.

Practical implications – Resorts and destination managers should make conservation and community engagement part of the guest experience and communicate the local economic value of tourism, which visitors currently do not perceive.

Originality/value – The study is among the first to disaggregate TBL sustainability into separate experiential antecedents in a small island developing state, and to test the tourist experience as the mechanism linking sustainability to satisfaction.

Keywords – Triple bottom line, Tourist experience, Tourist satisfaction, Expectation-disconfirmation theory, Small island developing states, Maldives

1. Introduction

Small island developing states (SIDS) depend on tourism more heavily than almost any other economies, yet the coral reefs, beaches and communities that attract visitors are the assets most exposed to climate

change and overdevelopment (Wolf et al., 2024). The Maldives illustrates this tension sharply. Tourism is the country's main source of foreign exchange and employment, while rising sea temperatures, reef degradation and waste pressures threaten the product on which the industry rests (Galli et al., 2025). Since the 1970s the country has relied on a tightly regulated "one island, one resort" model to contain these impacts (Scheyvens, 2011), and resorts increasingly invest in reef restoration, renewable energy and community programmes (Galli et al., 2025).

Whether such investments matter to visitors is less clear. Destination competitiveness models have long argued that sustainability and competitiveness are inseparable because a destination's resources create value only when they are converted into satisfying experiences (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Recent work shows that a distinct segment of travellers values sustainability (Tasci, Fyall, & Woosnam, 2022) and that sustainability perceptions are associated with satisfaction and loyalty (Kusumah, 2024). In the Maldives, Marinakou (2025) found that luxury travellers' attention to sustainability has grown since the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet three questions remain open.

First, most demand-side studies treat sustainability as a single, aggregate perception. The triple bottom line (TBL) distinguishes economic, social and environmental performance (Elkington, 1997), but it is rarely asked which of these pillars visitors perceive and reward. A pillar may be essential to a destination's viability and still be invisible in the guest experience. Second, the mechanism linking sustainability to satisfaction is under-specified. Expectation-disconfirmation theory (EDT) explains satisfaction as the outcome of comparing performance with expectations (Oliver, 1980), and memorable experience research shows that experiences are evaluated against such expectations (Tung & Ritchie, 2011). This suggests that sustainability should influence satisfaction through the experience it creates, but the mediating role of the tourist experience has seldom been tested. Third, the evidence base comes mainly from mainland and Western destinations, not resort-based island economies where the environment is both the core product and the most vulnerable asset (Wolf et al., 2024).

This study addresses these gaps. Drawing on survey data from 400 international visitors to Maldivian resorts and PLS-SEM, it asks: (1) Which TBL pillars significantly shape the tourist experience? (2) Does the tourist experience increase tourist satisfaction? (3) Does the tourist experience mediate the effects of the sustainability pillars on satisfaction? (4) Which pillar should managers prioritise?

The study makes three contributions. Theoretically, it integrates TBL with EDT, treating the sustainability pillars as distinct experiential antecedents rather than a single supply-side condition. Empirically, it shows that environmental and social sustainability, but not economic sustainability, are converted into satisfaction through the experience. Practically, an importance–performance map analysis translates these effects into priorities for resort operators and policymakers in island destinations.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1 Triple bottom line and expectation-disconfirmation theory

TBL holds that organisations and destinations are sustainable only when economic, social and environmental performance are managed together (Elkington, 1997). In tourism, TBL has mainly been applied from the supply side: to plan destinations, report corporate performance or assess resort practices (Galli et al., 2025). It says little about how visitors perceive each pillar. EDT supplies that missing psychological link. Satisfaction results from comparing perceived performance with prior expectations; performance that meets or exceeds expectations produces positive disconfirmation and satisfaction (Oliver, 1980). Applied to sustainability, visitors arrive with expectations about environmental care,

community relations and fair pricing. These expectations are confirmed or disconfirmed through what they encounter during the stay, that is, through the experience.

The two theories therefore play complementary roles in this study. TBL specifies the three sustainability antecedents; EDT explains how they are evaluated and turned into satisfaction. EDT used alone focuses on functional service delivery, whereas TBL used alone ignores the visitor; their integration makes the experience the point at which destination-level sustainability becomes a visitor-level outcome.

2.2 The tourist experience: Ritchie, Pearce and Tasci

Three bodies of work frame the tourist experience as used here. Ritchie and Crouch (2003) placed the visitor experience at the centre of the competitive, sustainable destination: resources create value only when they are converted into satisfying and memorable experiences. Tung and Ritchie (2011) identified affect, expectations, consequentiality and recollection as the dimensions through which experiences become memorable, and Kim et al. (2012) operationalised memorable experiences in a seven-dimension scale. Pearce's social-psychological work showed that experiences are shaped by layered motives that shift towards host-site involvement and nature as travel experience grows (Pearce & Lee, 2005), and that experiences unfold before, during and after the trip (Pearce, 2005; Pearce & Packer, 2013). Tasci and colleagues clarified the construct itself, defining customer experience as a multidimensional set of cognitive, affective, sensory and behavioural responses (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020), and showed that sustainability-minded tourists form a distinct segment (Tasci, Fyall, & Woosnam, 2022) and that destination image changes during a visit (Tasci & Moreno-Gil, 2024).

These strands establish that the experience is multidimensional, expectation-laden and the channel through which destination resources affect competitiveness. They treat sustainability, however, largely as a background property of the destination rather than an antecedent that visitors perceive within the experience. This study addresses that point by modelling each TBL pillar as a separate antecedent of the experience.

2.3 Hypotheses

Economic sustainability. Economic sustainability refers to fair and affordable pricing, seasonal price stability and the use of tourism taxes for local benefit. When visitors see prices as fair and taxes as contributing to the destination, perceived value and the quality of the experience should rise. It is also possible that economic outcomes such as employment and revenue retention are largely invisible to guests. Following TBL, a positive effect is hypothesised:

H1: Economic sustainability has a positive effect on the tourist experience.

Social sustainability. Social sustainability covers residents' quality of life, community development and the protection of cultural heritage. Authentic encounters with host communities are a core motive of experienced travellers (Pearce & Lee, 2005), and people-oriented ties with residents help to explain destination loyalty (Tasci, Uslu, et al., 2022). In the Maldives, opening local islands to guesthouse and excursion tourism has made such encounters part of the visitor offer.

H2: Social sustainability has a positive effect on the tourist experience.

Environmental sustainability. Island visitors come primarily for reefs, beaches and marine life, so the condition of the natural environment is part of the product itself (Wolf et al., 2024). Eco-friendly accommodation, environmental awareness, responsible transport and responsible visitation practices should therefore enrich the experience directly, particularly among visitors who value sustainability (Tasci, Fyall, & Woosnam, 2022).

H3: Environmental sustainability has a positive effect on the tourist experience.

Tourist experience and satisfaction. In EDT terms, a rich experience is the performance against which expectations are compared (Oliver, 1980). Memorable experiences that meet affective and cognitive expectations increase satisfaction (Tung & Ritchie, 2011), and sustainability-related experiences have been linked to satisfaction and loyalty (Kusumah, 2024).

H4: The tourist experience has a positive effect on tourist satisfaction.

Mediation. If sustainability is evaluated through the experience, the experience should transmit the effect of each pillar to satisfaction. The direct paths from each pillar to satisfaction are also estimated, so that partial and full mediation can be distinguished.

H5a–c: The tourist experience mediates the effects of (a) economic, (b) social and (c) environmental sustainability on tourist satisfaction.

Figure 1 Conceptual model



Figure 1 • Conceptual model: three TBL pillars, one mediator, one outcome

Note. Direct paths from each pillar to satisfaction are also estimated so that partial and full mediation can be distinguished.

3. Method

3.1 Instrument

The questionnaire was a self-developed instrument. Items for each construct were generated from the definitions and indicators in the literature and worded for the Maldivian resort context, because no single validated scale measured all three TBL pillars, the experience and satisfaction from the visitor's perspective. The draft was reviewed for content validity and pre-tested before the main survey [insert: number of expert reviewers and pilot respondents]. All substantive items used five-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Table 1 summarises the operationalisation; the full item list is provided in Appendix A.

Table 1 Operationalisation of constructs

Construct	Role	Sub-dimensions	Items
Economic sustainability (ES)	Exogenous	Seasonal price; affordability; sustainable tourism taxes	15

Construct	Role	Sub-dimensions	Items
Social sustainability (SS)	Exogenous	Resident life quality; community development; cultural heritage	15
Environmental sustainability (EnS)	Exogenous	Eco-friendly practices; accommodation; environmental awareness; responsible transportation; responsible visitation	30
Tourist experience (TE)	Mediator	Sustainable food and beverages; green events; recreation; water sports; excursions; diving; local island experience	34
Tourist satisfaction (TS)	Endogenous	Loyalty; location; facilities	10

3.2 Sample and data collection

The population comprised international tourists who had stayed in a Maldivian resort. Because no sampling frame of past visitors exists, a non-probability online approach was used. Potential respondents were identified through the public social-media pages of tourism companies that feature recent guests, contacted with information about the study and invited to complete a Google Forms questionnaire after giving informed consent. A screening question confirmed a stay in the Maldives [insert: data-collection period and screening wording]. A minimum sample of 385 was set using the formula for a population proportion (95% confidence, 5% margin of error); 400 usable responses were obtained, which also exceeds the minimum required to detect the model's effects in PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2022). Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and the study received institutional ethics approval [insert reference number]. Respondents were mostly male (71.5%), aged 26–35 (45.5%) or 36–45 (24.0%), married (71.3%), highly educated (48.5% master's, 9.5% doctoral degree) and self-employed (54.3%). Over half (50.7%) reported a monthly household income of US\$5,001–10,000. Respondents came from Asia (29.3%), the United Kingdom (15.3%), Russia (10.5%), continental Europe (9.0%), China (7.0%), the Middle East (6.5%), Japan (5.8%), Malaysia (5.5%) and elsewhere (11.3%).

3.3 Analysis

PLS-SEM was used in SmartPLS 4 because the study is prediction-oriented, the model includes several broadly defined constructs and the data are not assumed to be multivariate normal (Hair et al., 2019). The measurement model was evaluated through indicator loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (ρ_A and ρ_C), average variance extracted (AVE) and the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT; Henseler et al., 2015). The structural model was evaluated through collinearity (VIF), path coefficients with 5,000 bootstrap subsamples, R^2 and Q^2_{predict} . Indirect effects were tested with bootstrapped confidence intervals (Zhao et al., 2010). Finally, an importance–performance map analysis (IPMA) with tourist satisfaction as the target construct compared each construct's total effect with its rescaled mean performance (Ringle & Sarstedt, 2016).

Because all data came from one self-reported survey, common method variance was addressed procedurally (anonymity, separated construct sections) and statistically through a full collinearity test, in which all VIFs should be below 3.3 (Kock, 2015) [insert result].

4. Results

4.1 Measurement model

All constructs showed acceptable internal consistency: Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.738 to 0.907 and composite reliability (ρ_C) from 0.804 to 0.918 (Table 2). [AVE TO INSERT FROM SMARTPLS: the thesis does not report AVE. In SmartPLS 4 open the PLS-SEM algorithm results → Quality criteria → Construct reliability and validity; AVE is the last column beside Cronbach's alpha, ρ_A and ρ_C . Each AVE must be at least 0.50. With all items retained, the reported ρ_C values imply AVE of only about 0.22–0.29, so items with outer loadings below 0.708 will probably need to be removed (keeping ρ_C and content validity) and the model re-estimated; all tables then need updating.]

Table 2 Reliability and convergent validity

Construct	Cronbach's α	ρ_A	ρ_C	AVE
Economic sustainability	0.805	0.818	0.847	0.27
Environmental sustainability	0.876	0.881	0.894	0.22
Social sustainability	0.785	0.800	0.833	0.25
Tourist experience	0.907	0.917	0.918	0.25
Tourist satisfaction	0.738	0.760	0.804	0.29

Discriminant validity is the weakest property of the model (Table 3). Three HTMT values fall below 0.90, all involving economic sustainability; the other seven exceed it, most notably social and environmental sustainability (0.990). Respondents therefore appear to perceive the social and environmental practices of resorts as closely related, consistent with the interdependence of the TBL pillars.

Table 3 Heterotrait–monotrait ratios

	ES	EnS	SS	TE
EnS	0.895			
SS	0.919	0.990		
TE	0.832	0.949	0.963	
TS	0.867	0.965	0.943	0.941

4.2 Structural model

The model explained 75.8% of the variance in the tourist experience (adjusted $R^2 = 0.757$) and 69.7% in tourist satisfaction (adjusted $R^2 = 0.694$), indicating substantial explanatory power. [Insert inner VIFs and Q^2_{predict} .] The SRMR of the estimated model (0.152) is above conventional thresholds; because PLS-SEM is prediction-oriented, the model is assessed mainly on its explanatory and predictive power (Hair et al., 2019), and the SRMR is reported as a limitation.

Table 4 reports the path estimates. Environmental sustainability ($\beta = 0.496$, $p < 0.001$) and social sustainability ($\beta = 0.377$, $p < 0.001$) had significant positive effects on the tourist experience, supporting H2 and H3. Economic sustainability had no significant effect ($\beta = 0.046$, $p = 0.651$), so H1 was not supported. The tourist experience had a significant positive effect on satisfaction ($\beta = 0.306$, $p = 0.005$), supporting H4. Among the direct effects on satisfaction, environmental sustainability was significant ($\beta = 0.334$, $p = 0.001$), social sustainability was marginal ($\beta = 0.166$, $p = 0.050$) and economic sustainability was not significant.

Table 4 Structural path estimates

Path	β	SD	t	p	Decision
H1 ES $\rightarrow$ TE	0.046	0.101	0.452	0.651	Not supported
H2 SS $\rightarrow$ TE	0.377	0.093	4.046	< 0.001	Supported
H3 EnS $\rightarrow$ TE	0.496	0.074	6.723	< 0.001	Supported
H4 TE $\rightarrow$ TS	0.306	0.109	2.819	0.005	Supported
ES $\rightarrow$ TS (direct)	0.094	0.086	1.097	0.273	—
SS $\rightarrow$ TS (direct)	0.166	0.085	1.958	0.050	—
EnS $\rightarrow$ TS (direct)	0.334	0.104	3.218	0.001	—

Note. Bootstrapped standard deviations; [confirm number of bootstrap subsamples].

4.3 Mediation

The tourist experience mediated the effects of environmental sustainability (indirect effect = 0.152, $p = 0.013$) and social sustainability (indirect effect = 0.115, $p = 0.002$) on satisfaction, supporting H5b and H5c (Table 5). Because the direct effect of environmental sustainability remained significant, its mediation is partial; for social sustainability, whose direct effect was marginal, mediation is close to full. The indirect effect of economic sustainability was not significant (0.014, $p = 0.761$), so H5a was not supported.

Table 5 Specific indirect effects

Path	Indirect effect	SD	t	p	95% CI	Decision
H5a ES $\rightarrow$ TE $\rightarrow$ TS	0.014	0.046	0.304	0.761	[-0.076, 0.104]	Not supported
H5b SS $\rightarrow$ TE $\rightarrow$ TS	0.115	0.038	3.063	0.002	[0.041, 0.189]	Supported
H5c EnS $\rightarrow$ TE $\rightarrow$ TS	0.152	0.061	2.475	0.013	[0.032, 0.272]	Supported

4.4 Importance–performance map

With tourist satisfaction as the target, environmental sustainability combined the highest importance (total effect = 0.482) with the highest performance (80.48 on a 0–100 scale). The tourist experience (0.300; 80.03) and social sustainability (0.282; 79.15) followed. Economic sustainability had the lowest importance (0.111) and the lowest performance (76.55).

5. Discussion

The central finding is that the three TBL pillars are not equivalent from the visitor's perspective. Environmental and social sustainability shape the tourist experience strongly and reach satisfaction

through it, while economic sustainability has no detectable effect. Sustainability, in other words, generates satisfaction only when visitors can see and feel it during their stay.

Environmental sustainability as part of the product. Environmental sustainability was the strongest predictor of both the experience and satisfaction and had the highest importance and performance in the IPMA. In an island destination the natural environment is not a backdrop but the core of what is consumed: reefs, lagoons and beaches are experienced directly through snorkelling, diving and excursions. This supports Ritchie and Crouch's (2003) argument that natural resources are core attractors whose value depends on stewardship, and it is consistent with evidence that sustainability perceptions now shape luxury travel to the Maldives (Marinakou, 2025). The partial mediation shows that environmental practices also influence satisfaction directly, perhaps because visitors value conservation for its own sake, as the sustainable-consumer segment described by Tasci, Fyall and Woosnam (2022) would suggest.

Social sustainability through encounters. Social sustainability affected satisfaction almost entirely through the experience. This fits Pearce and Lee's (2005) finding that host-site involvement becomes a central motive for experienced travellers, and the evidence that people-oriented ties with residents contribute to loyalty (Tasci, Uslu, et al., 2022). In the Maldivian context, where resorts have historically been separated from inhabited islands (Scheyvens, 2011), community engagement appears to matter to visitors mainly when it is converted into an encounter, such as a local-island excursion or a cultural activity.

The invisibility of economic sustainability. The non-significant economic paths run against the TBL premise that economic viability underpins the other pillars, but they are consistent with EDT. Visitors can only confirm or disconfirm what they observe. Employment, revenue retention and the use of tourism taxes occur at destination and community level, outside the guest's field of view; price fairness, meanwhile, may be judged against the high reference prices visitors expect in a luxury destination. Economic sustainability may therefore be essential for the destination yet experientially silent. Its low IPMA performance also suggests that green and luxury taxes are perceived as costs rather than as contributions.

The experience as mechanism. The significant path from experience to satisfaction, and the mediation of the environmental and social effects, support integrating TBL with EDT. Sustainability practices act as performance cues within the experience; satisfaction results when those cues meet or exceed visitors' expectations (Oliver, 1980; Tung & Ritchie, 2011).

One caution applies. The high HTMT values between social sustainability, environmental sustainability, experience and satisfaction indicate that respondents may perceive these as one integrated impression of a "responsible resort". The relative size of the social and environmental effects should therefore be read as indicative rather than precise.

6. Implications

6.1 Theoretical implications

First, the study extends TBL from a supply-side management framework to a demand-side explanatory model. Disaggregating the pillars shows that they differ in experiential salience, so studies that aggregate sustainability into one perception may conceal a non-effect of the economic pillar behind strong environmental and social effects. Second, by integrating TBL with EDT, the study specifies a mechanism: sustainability practices become satisfaction only when they are encountered, and therefore evaluated, within the experience. This adds a sustainability antecedent to the expectation-based view of memorable

experiences (Tung & Ritchie, 2011) and to the multidimensional experience construct (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020). Third, the findings qualify destination-competitiveness thinking for SIDS: the natural environment is simultaneously the core attractor, the main driver of satisfaction and the most vulnerable asset, which makes environmental stewardship a demand-side as well as a supply-side imperative.

6.2 Practical implications

The IPMA translates the results into priorities for resorts and destination authorities:

1. **Protect and showcase the environment.** Environmental sustainability is the highest-importance driver and already performs well, so it should be maintained and made part of the guest experience, for example through reef-restoration programmes guests can join, marine-biology briefings and visible renewable-energy and waste systems.
2. **Turn community engagement into encounters.** Social sustainability works through the experience. Local-island excursions, cultural programmes, local food and resident-led activities convert community benefits into something guests can experience.
3. **Make the economic contribution visible.** Visitors do not perceive the economic pillar. Transparent communication of how green taxes are spent, of local employment and of local sourcing could convert an invisible pillar into an expectation that is positively confirmed.
4. **Policy.** The Ministry of Tourism can use these findings in destination marketing, positioning the Maldives on verified environmental and community credentials, and in tax design, linking the green tax to visible conservation outcomes.

7. Limitations and future research

Several limitations qualify the findings. First, discriminant validity was not fully established and the SRMR exceeded conventional cut-offs, indicating overlap among social sustainability, environmental sustainability, experience and satisfaction; future studies should refine the items and test a higher-order sustainability construct. Second, data were collected from a non-probability online sample recruited through social media, which over-represents younger, highly educated and digitally active travellers; probability or on-site intercept sampling would improve generalisability. Third, the cross-sectional, single-source design cannot establish causality and raises the possibility of common method variance; longitudinal or experimental designs, and objective indicators of resort sustainability, would strengthen inference. Fourth, the study covers one destination; multi-group comparisons across visitor origins and comparative studies across SIDS such as Mauritius, Seychelles and Fiji would test the boundary conditions of the model. Finally, the downstream link from satisfaction to sustainable tourism development and to pro-environmental behaviour on site deserves direct testing.

8. Conclusion

Sustainability creates value for island destinations through the experience it gives visitors. In the Maldives, environmental and social sustainability shape the tourist experience and, through it, satisfaction, whereas economic sustainability remains invisible to guests. For SIDS that depend on tourism, the lesson is to make sustainability experiential: protect the natural environment as the core product, convert community benefits into encounters, and show visitors how their spending supports the destination.

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