Title A Comparative Analysis of Instagram Influences and AI-Generated Recommendations on Travel Decision-Making

Eleni Tsitsirigou
MCAST - IBMC

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Abstract:

This study offers a comparative analysis of how Instagram influences and AI-generated recommendations shape travel decision-making, presenting a holistic paradigm that connects digital behaviour with emerging sustainability expectations in tourism. As EU ESG regulations intensify under the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), tourism-dependent economies such as Malta face increasing pressure to demonstrate transparent, measurable practices aligned with societal values. Although travellers respond dynamically to both the visual stimuli of Instagram and the personalised, algorithmic logic of AI systems, empirical evidence indicates that Malta's 4-star hotels lag behind EU counterparts in ESG integration due to financial and operational constraints. By examining the synergy between social media inspiration and AI-driven guidance, this research identifies how these digital forces influence tourist choices as they intersect with rising sustainability priorities. The study aims to support hotels and policymakers in developing strategic interventions that enhance competitiveness and align operations with evolving ESG standards.

Keywords: Travel Decision-Making, Instagram Influences, AI-Generated Recommendations, Sustainable Tourism Paradigms

Track : Tourism Marketing

1. Introduction

Environmental, Social, and Governance(ESG) has emerged as a dominant paradigm guiding organisations in assessing sustainable and ethical dimensions of business practice and performance (Mathis et al., 2023). This shift reflects a broader global transition from traditional Corporate Social Responsibility toward more structured, measurable, and accountability-driven frameworks (Gillan et al., 2021). Within the European Union, the regulatory landscape is evolving rapidly, with plans to introduce more stringent ESG obligations by 2030 (Bernoville, 2024). Such developments demonstrate the EU's commitment to embedding sustainability within economic activity through systemic legislative mechanisms (Papathanasiou et al, 2025).

As digital technologies evolve, travellers are increasingly able to engage with destinations and experiences in more immersive and interactive ways. Beyond traditional social media inspiration found on platforms such as Instagram, AI-driven tools now enable users to participate in simulated events, explore digital environments, and interact with personalised virtual assistants. These innovations suggest a shift from merely viewing travel inspiration to actively experiencing tailored digital scenarios—reshaping how travellers evaluate destinations and make decisions (Buhalis et al, 2025).

In the hospitality industry, an inherently resource-intensive sector, the ESG framework carries significant strategic relevance. The Environmental dimension prioritises reductions in water use, waste, and emissions (Goh et al, 2019); the social pillar focuses on community engagement, cultural preservation, and labour rights; while Governance concerns food safety, ethical marketing, and regulatory compliance (Hoang, 2023). ESG reporting has thus become a key mechanism for assessing sustainability performance, strengthening financial outcomes, and enhancing organisational resilience (Lu, 2016). Owing to high energy and resource consumption, hospitality firms face increasing pressure to adopt holistic ESG practices (Guzzo et al., 2023). Unlike CSR, ESG extends the sustainability ethos through stronger governmental oversight and measurable performance criteria (Lee et al., 2022).

The research problem arises within an evolving European sustainability paradigm, driven by the CSRD, which aims to harmonise ESG disclosures, enhance transparency, and curb greenwashing through stricter enforcement (European Commission, 2025; Papathanassiou & Nieto, 2025). Despite these reforms, Malta's 4-star hotel sector continues to lag behind other EU member states due to systemic financial, operational, and organisational constraints (Camilleri, 2022). This gap is significant given the established link between sustainability practices, competitive advantage, and long-term organisational resilience in hospitality (Jones et al., 2016), as well as the growing influence of environmentally conscious traveller behaviour (Dickinson, 2023).

Addressing these structural challenges is essential for policymakers and industry leaders seeking to advance a stronger sustainability ethos within the sector. However, empirical evidence on ESG adoption in Malta's mid-scale hotels remains limited. This paper, therefore, examines the core constraints shaping ESG integration and offers strategic, actionable recommendations to support alignment with evolving European standards (Papathanasiou et al, 2025).

2. Literature Review

Literature underscores the pivotal role of the hotel industry in advancing sustainable development (Singh & Dutt, 2023). Recent studies argue that ESG should function as a foundational strategic paradigm rather than an auxiliary initiative (Fenech, 2024). Singh and Dutt (2023) illustrate how hotel groups in Dubai support the SDGs through community partnerships, carbon reporting, and sustainable procurement, reflecting a growing institutional sustainability ethos. Within the European and Maltese context, Fenech (2024) finds increasing integration of ESG principles, particularly in waste management and water use, though reporting remains inconsistent. Smaller and mid-scale hotels, including 4-star establishments, face systemic constraints in capacity and resources, limiting their ESG adoption (Singh & Dutt, 2023). Dimitriadou et al. (2023) highlight the broader issue of inadequate harmonisation of ESG methodologies, noting that many European hotel chains are unprepared for forthcoming EU disclosure requirements. This lack of standardisation impedes benchmarking and comparability of ESG performance across the sector (Roxas et al, 2020).

Financial constraints remain a principal barrier to ESG adoption in small and mid-sized hotels (He et al., 2024). Green finance accessibility across the EU is highly uneven, with a persistent "usability gap" created by restrictive eligibility criteria and technocratic application processes (Lu et al., 2025; He et al, 2024). Energy and waste continue to dominate the Environmental pillar, particularly in resource-limited island contexts, yet technologies such as Combined Heat and Power (CHP) remain underutilised due to high capital costs and limited financial expertise (Magro et al, 2023).

Nica et al. (2023) note that operational managers struggle to balance cost-efficiency with long-term sustainability, citing limited training in energy management and insufficient budgets for green upgrades across European hotels. Alameeri et al. (2018) report similar constraints in UAE hotels, where sustainable waste initiatives remain under-implemented due to low employee engagement and weak customer awareness. Governance and stakeholder collaboration also emerge as critical factors. Dias et al. (2024) find that weak institutional support and fragmented regulations undermine sustainable tourism in Portugal, emphasising the need for more harmonised policy structures. Roxas et al. (2020) propose an integrated governance paradigm in which authorities, businesses, communities, and visitors collectively drive sustainability, aligning with evidence that contemporary travellers increasingly demand responsible practices. Together, these studies indicate that ESG initiatives must extend beyond internal operations and embrace transparent, collaborative engagement with regulators, communities, and guests (Dias et al., 2024).

A critical gap in the literature is the absence of studies focused specifically on Malta's 4-star hotels; most research either generalises across the hospitality sector or concentrates on luxury segments. Moreover, although environmental strategies are well documented, the accessibility of financial support schemes and the effectiveness of governance structures remain substantially understudied. This lack of context-specific, empirical evidence limits the sector's ability to adopt ESG practices in a realistic and scalable manner.

3. Methodology

Research Question 1:

To what extent are Malta's 4-star hotels operationalising ESG principles within their day-to-day activities, and which primary constraints impede effective implementation?

Research Question 2:

What financial mechanisms exist to support ESG compliance among Malta's 4-star hotels, and how accessible and practicable are these instruments in real-world application?

This study adopted an interpretivist philosophy, which was well-suited to exploring how hotel managers perceive and operationalise ESG practices within their daily routines. Interpretivism provided the most appropriate lens for examining participants' subjective experiences, decision-making processes, and the dilemmas encountered by Operations Managers in 4-star hotels (Ryan, 2018). Given that ESG implementation is inherently shaped by organisational culture, resource availability, and stakeholder pressures, this philosophical stance enabled a deeper understanding of the contextual realities influencing managerial behaviour. The interpretivist approach, therefore, aligned closely with the study's objective to generate context-specific insights grounded in participants' perspectives. As noted by Ishtiaq (2019), interpretivism is particularly suitable for research relying on qualitative inquiry, such as interviews, where nuanced interpretation is required to understand complex organisational phenomena.

A qualitative, inductive approach was employed to generate insights into the challenges surrounding ESG integration in the hospitality sector. This design was appropriate given the limited existing literature and the need to build theory directly from managers' accounts. As Thomas (2006) argues, inductive research is well-suited to underexplored contexts, enabling the emergence of new conceptual understandings. Following this logic, interviews were conducted, the responses were systematically reviewed, and theoretical propositions were developed based on the patterns identified.

4. Major Findings and Discussion

The literature positions ESG as a central strategic paradigm for the hotel industry, yet adoption across Europe remains uneven and inconsistently documented. Mid-scale hotels face pronounced resource constraints, limited organisational capacity, and a lack of harmonised reporting frameworks, complicating benchmarking and compliance with emerging EU disclosure requirements. Financial barriers further impede progress, as access to green finance is variable and mechanisms are often administratively complex. Consequently, long-term sustainability investments are frequently deprioritised, particularly when they demand substantial capital or specialised expertise. Operational managers also confront limited training, competing priorities, and inadequate institutional support, all of which undermine effective ESG implementation.

Governance and stakeholder collaboration emerge as additional weaknesses, with fragmented institutional structures limiting coherent sector-wide action. At the same time, consumer expectations are shifting rapidly toward environmentally and socially responsible tourism, signalling that ESG performance is increasingly tied to competitiveness. Despite these trends, notable research gaps persist, particularly concerning the practical realities of ESG integration in mid-scale hotels within smaller tourism economies. The limited empirical evidence on financial accessibility, governance effectiveness, and operational feasibility restricts the development of realistic, scalable pathways for sustainability transformation in the sector.

5. Conclusions and Implications

This study generated practical and analytical insights into ESG integration within Europe's mid-scale hotel sector, particularly in light of the evolving CSRD requirements. The findings highlighted the need for enhanced environmental, social, and governance performance while revealing persistent operational and financial constraints that limit effective ESG implementation. By identifying key barriers and enabling conditions, the research contributes to advancing sustainable hospitality practice across the European tourism landscape.

The results provided Operations Managers with evidence-based guidance for embedding ESG principles into routine practices. The study showed that measures such as waste reduction, energy-efficiency initiatives, and socially responsible operations can align with, and even enhance, overall performance. It also identified best-practice models from comparable European hotels, demonstrating how ESG actions can be integrated without disrupting workflow or diminishing the guest experience.

The study demonstrated that ESG integration extends beyond regulatory compliance and contributes directly to long-term value creation. The findings supported existing empirical evidence that investments in areas such as clean energy systems and ethical supply chains generate measurable returns while strengthening competitiveness and alignment with EU requirements. These insights can inform more strategic capital allocation, risk management, and long-term planning within the European hospitality sector.

6. Limitations

This research is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the study focused exclusively on Malta's 4-star hotel segment, which restricts the generalisability of results to other hotel categories or larger European markets with different regulatory, financial, and operational contexts. Second, the reliance on qualitative interviews introduces an inherent subjectivity, as managerial perceptions may reflect personal interpretations, organisational cultures, or strategic positioning rather than fully objective accounts of ESG implementation. Third, the study was conducted during a period of ongoing regulatory transition under the CSRD, meaning that participants' understanding of forthcoming requirements may have been incomplete or evolving. Fourth, access constraints limited the sample to managers willing to participate, which may have introduced a self-selection bias favouring organisations already more engaged or aware of ESG practices. Finally, the absence of standardised ESG reporting frameworks across mid-scale hotels restricted the ability to triangulate interview data with comparable quantitative performance indicators. These limitations highlight the need for broader, mixed-method, and cross-country research to strengthen empirical robustness and comparability in future studies

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