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Trust as a mediator of pro-environmental knowledge transfer and behaviour in small and medium-sized tourism enterprises

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ABSTRACT

Studies into tourism enterprises acknowledge the importance of trust in facilitating effective pro-environmental knowledge transfer and action. Yet empirical support remains inconclusive. Firstly, this research tests the validity of a model proposing four antecedents of trust-based decisions in tourism enterprises; self-efficacy, social norms, social capital, and credibility. Secondly, we deconstruct the knowledge transfer process, focusing on the mediating effect of trust on the intention to act sustainably upon transferred knowledge. The study surveyed UK-based tourism enterprises using a structural equation approach to test the validity of the model. Bootstrap analysis was employed to assess how trust-based decisions inform pro-environmental knowledge transfer and behavioural intentions. Findings validate all four antecedents with social norms found to be the most influential antecedent in pro-environmental knowledge transfer. Secondly, they validate the role of trust in lubricating the transition from pro-environmental knowledge transfer to the intention to behave sustainably. Future qualitative studies are proposed alongside practical implications. Specifically, the study suggests tourism managers should prioritise social norm interventions in any pro-environmental knowledge transfer initiatives and focus on those actors who are most trusted in organisations to deliver pro-environmental messages.

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Pro-environmental knowledge transfer; trust; antecedents of trust; small and medium sized tourism enterprises; Trust-based decisions

Statement of novelty

Tourism researchers have long suggested that trust in knowledge sources, transfer partners and knowledge management systems can impact knowledge transfer and assimilation. The novelty of this resubmitted article centres on challenging this assumption. Specifically, this research explores how trust impacts the intentions and behaviours of SME managers when engaging with pro-environmental knowledge. Taking a multi-disciplinary approach, the research identifies and tests four antecedents of trust-based decision making; self-efficacy, social norms, social capital, and credibility.

Based on data collected in the UK, the study identifies social norms as the most influential mediator of pro-environmental knowledge transfer and clearly situates trust as a lubricant to progression from a willingness to engage with pro-environmental knowledge to actioning same.

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The findings emphasise the importance of trust-based decision making in pro-environmental knowledge management and are therefore important to tourism academics and practitioners. As tourism scholarship, tourism sectoral organisations and progressive managers seek to advance sustainability in the industry from awareness and intentions to action, the study identifies that SME managers respond favourably to social norms as antecedents to trust. Future studies are identified to advance this emerging theme. Specifically, qualitative and action research approaches are suggested to explore how trust informs inter-personal and inter-organisational sustainable knowledge transfer to support the adoption of practices and systems that make impactful contributions to a pro-environmental tourism sector.

Introduction

This paper considers how small to medium sized tourism enterprise (SMTE) managers engage with and select appropriate knowledge to positively contribute to a sustainable tourism industry. Specifically, we evaluate and empirically test the dimensions of trust-based decisions as a mediator of SMTE managers' willingness and intention to engage in the transfer of pro-environmental knowledge, and to act upon it.

Necessitating the transition to sustainable tourism requires a deep understanding of how to engage, support and develop sustainability knowledge within tourism practitioners (Font et al., 2023). Explicitly this would empower SMTEs to use sustainability data to inform practices within their tourism operations, as well as encourage pro-environmental behaviour by their customers (Sampaio et al., 2012). The rationale for SMTEs engagement in pro-environmental actions may differ, but a key motivation is to ensure the organisation is perceived as a trusted operator based on their empathy, care and responsibility for the environment and host community (Dredge, 2022).

SMTEs have a unique role in supporting sustainable tourism. They can satisfy emerging and fluctuating tourism demand, frame a culture of entrepreneurship, and pivot towards market conditions and demands. Yet, SMTEs operate with limited resources (Garay et al., 2019) and Font et al. (2023) suggest a key barrier to the acceptance of sustainable knowledge is the lack of resources and in-house skills to effectively access, absorb, and utilise pertinent knowledge. To overcome such challenges, SMTE managers can access knowledge via trade associations or alliances (Del Chiappa & Baggio, 2015) where larger, established entities with greater resources reduce risk exposure to new knowledge (Moretti et al., 2024). Indeed studies suggest pro-environmental knowledge acquisition via tourism sectoral organisations bridges the gap between sustainability-focused national policies and industry (Palazzo et al., 2021) and fosters shared norms, trust and reciprocity between industry peers (Martínez-Pérez et al., 2016).

However, Becken and Coghlan (2024) contend that knowledge alone is not an enabler of adopting pro-environmental tourism behaviours as it simply improves the SMTEs' *intention* to act sustainably but does not guarantee sustainable *actions*. These arguments distinguish between the *potential* absorptive capacity of SMTEs and their *actual* absorption of pro-environmental knowledge (Font et al., 2023).

The personal motivations, perceptions and awareness of SMTE managers are critical to the organisational acceptance of pro-environmental knowledge and initiatives (Martínez-Martínez et al., 2023). Commitment to the organisation's pro-environmental knowledge acquisition may also be determined by behaviours of tourists (increasing demand) and industry peers (acceptability) (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2020; O'Connor & Assaker, 2022).

This study draws on McTiernan et al.'s (2023) conceptual model of the antecedents of trust and the contention that the SMTE manager's willingness to trust and action pro-environmental knowledge is impacted by four inputs. These antecedents are (i) the individual's self-efficacy or belief that they can contribute positively to sustainable tourism action; (ii) the influence of social norms on SMTE managers' pro-environmental intentions; (iii) their trust of such knowledge based on existing inter-personal relationships; and (iv) the SMTE's decision to trust pro-environmental knowledge based on a rational trust of that source.

To our knowledge, no empirical research has explored this conceptual model, and how these antecedents determine the trustworthiness of pro-environmental knowledge at the pivotal stage of acquisition within SMTEs (McTiernan et al., 2023). As such, our paper has two key aims. First, we aim to empirically test whether trust-based antecedents inform pro-environmental knowledge transfer in SMTEs, addressing assumptions in previous research surrounding the influence of trust (Martínez-Martínez et al., 2023). This builds on Van der Werff et al. (2019) and McTiernan et al. (2019), by examining knowledge transfer through a context-dependent, psychosocial lens. Secondly, we respond to calls from researchers by ascertaining the mediating effect of trust-based decisions in this transfer process (Li et al., 2021; May et al., 2021; Meddour et al., 2019; Renzl, 2008; Schwaer et al., 2012). More specifically, bootstrap analysis was employed to investigate whether trust-based decisions mediate the willingness and intention to source, transfer and implement pro-environmental knowledge. Cumulatively, this paper contributes to the knowledge of understanding how SMTE managers position trust in the absorption and application of pro-environmental knowledge, addressing calls for further research (McTiernan et al., 2023; Williams & Baláž, 2021).

Theoretical foundation and hypotheses development

This section introduces McTiernan et al.'s (2023) conceptual model of trust-based decisions. It continues by unpacking the relationship between trust-based decisions, willingness and intention in the knowledge transfer process and in particular the lubricating role of trust in the process of knowledge transmission, absorption and action.

The model

McTiernan et al.'s (2023) conceptual model explores psychosocial antecedents as conditions of trust-based decisions (Figure 1). Four antecedents are posited that utilise both cognitive and affective elements of trust (Ramkissoon, 2023). Studies suggest that SMTE managers' willingness to trust and

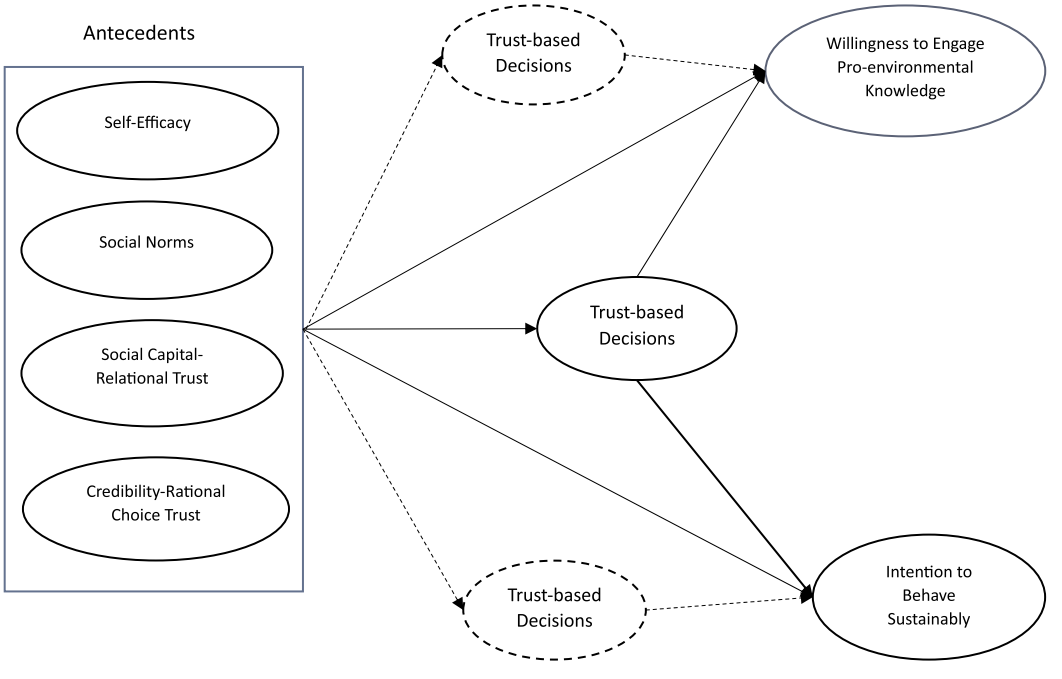

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

engage in pro-environmental knowledge and source is based upon a bandwidth of 'trustworthiness' (Høyer & Mønness, 2016; Pagliara et al., 2021). Specifically, the indicators of trustworthiness include the ability, benevolence and integrity of the knowledge and personalised trust in the knowledge source (Dietz, 2011). Trust and trustworthiness are also determined by the context and the SMTE manager's decision to trust an actor. In turn, this is influenced by their motivations to expose their own vulnerabilities to the actor and their perceptions and experiences of the relationship in question (Van der Werff et al., 2019). While such themes are explored in scholarship on trust (Kothe et al., 2019; Paillé & Raineri, 2016), tourism scholars have called for similar research to link personal motivations to a willingness to act within a tourism context (Garay et al., 2017; Martínez-Martínez et al., 2023).

Tourism researchers examining pro-social and pro-environmental behaviours often use theories such as the Norm Activation Model (NAM) or the Theory of Planned Behaviours (TPB). De Groot and Steg's (2009) interpretation of the NAM suggests an individual's morality can predict their willingness to engage in pro-social behaviours based on three issues: personal norms; awareness of consequences of actions; and perceptions of responsibility for negative consequences. The implication for trust-based knowledge transfer is that tourism managers with strong environmental values are most likely to engage with external stakeholders who hold similar values when developing practical pro-environmental policies (Jang et al., 2017). An alternative perspective, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), is prominent in tourism literature (Harris et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2017). Expanding on the Theory of Reasoned Action, which suggests that an individual's acts are under volitional control (Hsu & Kuo, 2003), the TPB contends that individuals tend to act based on attitudes, or changes in attitudes, to particular behaviours (Chu & Chu, 2013). Such behaviours are informed by the individual's attitudes, behavioural norms and perceived behavioural controls (Lee & Back, 2007). Interestingly, TPB has increasingly been used in other tourism contexts such as Garay et al.'s (2019) assessment of motivations to engage in innovative solutions to pro-environmental and sustainable behaviours. This focus on the motivations of tourism managers based on environmental values is important as it clearly situates behaviour norms as a key variable in knowledge transfer activities of pro-social and pro-environmental behaviour.

Antecedents of trust-based decisions

Cumulatively, McTiernan et al.'s (2023) conceptual model build on the contemporary theories outlined above which pertain to attitudes, behaviours and actions of SMTE managers in relation to pro-environmental tourism knowledge. The conceptual model explores psychosocial antecedents as conditions of trust-based decisions (Figure 1). Four antecedents are posited that utilise both cognitive and affective elements of trust; namely self-efficacy, social norms, social capital and credibility.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is synonymous with Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2002), and more broadly referred to as 'fundamental' to the psychological determinants of behaviour (Amaya & Petosa, 2012). Self-efficacy involves a cognitive belief in one's own capability, judged by high to low indicators. High self-efficacy is characterised by a strong belief in achieving a set goal; low-self-efficacy is characterised by doubt, and a reluctance to persevere with challenging tasks (Sampaio et al., 2012). Yet, Bringing about significant sustainable knowledge transfer (and change) to existing tourism operations, therefore, requires self-efficacy from SMTE managers (Kim, 2020). As an antecedent of trust, self-efficacy can subconsciously increase individuals' confidence and the intentions between SMTE stakeholders, thereby minimising trust-related problems and promoting collective efficacy (Jugert et al., 2016). For example, Kelliher et al. (2018) determined that through the process of bonding, rural tourism network members were empowered to act upon intentions of shared knowledge assets, but such aspirations are limited by SMTE managers' pro-environmental intentions (Jang et al., 2017). Equally, Kornilaki and Font (2019) found that while efficacy can be a key influence on the

adoption of pro-environmental knowledge, distrust of state and other influential tourism stakeholders can deter the intentions of the most pro-environmentally disposed SMTE manager.

Given this, we contend that self-efficacy is a significant determinant of trust-based decisions, and a regulator of the perceived trustworthiness of social actors and knowledge sources involved in inter-organisational pro-environmental knowledge transfer.

Social norms

Various models, such as Normative Decision Making (Schwartz & Howard, 1981); the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 2011); Norm Activation Model (De Groot & Steg, 2009); the Theory of Interpersonal Behaviour (Bamberg & Schmidt, 2003); the Transtheoretical Model of change (Prochaska & Norcross, 2007); and the Value Belief Norm theory (Stern, 2000) place social norms as the capstone to trust within pro-environmental behaviour change. Drawing from this, we accept that the social norms of SMTEs are susceptible to societal expectations and must reflect evolving consumer attitudes within their operations to avoid reputational damage and appeal to an increasingly environmentally-conscious traveller (Dharmesti et al., 2020). Social norms may also direct SMTE managers' intentions to motivate others and act sustainably. In this study, social norms are a mechanism of societal pressure that encourages pro-environmental intentions, compliance and acceptability derived from societal interest (Azam & Abdullah, 2022). Where these extrinsic and intrinsic motivations exist within the manager, actors are more likely to seek and action trust-based engagements, often mimicking industry peers, to ensure their SMTE positively contributes to the pro-environmental agenda (Gifford, 2011).

The potent combination of psychosocial elements returns us to McTiernan et al. (2023) who propose that fostering these characteristics will reduce barriers to the transfer of pro-environmental knowledge. Specifically, societal norms can push managers to accept pro-environmental transfer of knowledge, and over time increase the manager's trust in actionable pro-environmental innovations and interventions (Higuchi & Yamanaka, 2017).

Social capital

Allied with social norms, the presence of social capital can mitigate against rational fears of misplaced trust in pro-environmental knowledge transfer. Drawing from Bourdieu's (1986) seminal work, high level means that a person (or another entity, e.g. an enterprise) has a certain number of relationships with others, whose knowledge, skills, and experience can be used in a particular moment or for a particular need. This concept remains the prevailing power-trust dynamic and sets an expectation of reciprocity from all parties (Russo & Perrini, 2010). Often the strength of social capital relies on previous collaborative experiences. In this context, social capital is deemed an affective element between actors, and mediates intention and a willingness to trust all parties, therefore minimising a sense of vulnerability in the absence of pro-environmental knowledge (Heidari et al., 2014; Liu, 2018). Equally, while inter-personal and relational trust can encourage social capital between collaborators, such ties may not realise the benefits expected by those involved in the knowledge transfer process (Kelliher et al., 2018). Pro-environmental knowledge transfer may be impeded by differences in cognitive processes (Jaouen & Lasch, 2015), and mis-alignment in the organisation's values (Ogunmokun et al., 2020), or a mismatch of the collaborative process (Zeng et al., 2014). To this end, questions remain over the direct relationship between social capital, trust-based decisions, the intention to engage sustainably, knowledge transfer and similarly, willingness to engage in and action sustainable knowledge transfer.

Credibility

Although social capital may alleviate the risk of inter-personal mistrust, there remains a threat that the credibility of the pro-environmental knowledge itself, or the knowledge source, may be

misinterpreted, resulting in significant inertia (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2020). Rooted in several theoretical frameworks such as Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2002) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 2011), when SMTE managers hold conflicting views on the credibility of the knowledge source, it can create a polarisation of trust, willingness and intention to act. For instance, SMTE managers who see knowledge sources as credible are more likely to make decisions based on trust in the knowledge sources, allocating resources towards addressing environmental challenges. Conversely, when knowledge is less credible, barriers to the adoption of pro-environmental knowledge such as time, finance and understanding prevail (Garay et al., 2019).

Credibility has long been established as a key descriptor of trust, often linked to terms of repute, such as ability (Mayer et al., 1995). McTiernan et al. (2023) acknowledge that credibility-based trust can also be utilised where risks are present. In the absence of certainty, the credibility of the knowledge source can reassure SMTE managers about the impact of applying that knowledge. Equally, studies show that managers can be reluctant to accept pro-environmental knowledge sources based on perceptions of scientific exaggeration, technical complexity, and the risk that the knowledge will fail to address the pro-environmental expectations of the SMTE manager (Garay et al., 2019, 2017).

We therefore expect that self-efficacy, social norms, social capital, and credibility, will directly influence decisions based upon trust. Moreover, these antecedents will have a direct relationship with a willingness to engage with pro-environmental knowledge and the intention to behave sustainably. On this basis, we hypothesise that:

- H1: Self-efficacy (a), social norms (b), social capital (c), and credibility (d) have a positive and direct effect on trust-based decisions in pro-environmental knowledge transfer of SMTEs.
- H2: Self-efficacy (a), social norms (b), social capital (c), and credibility (d) have a positive and direct effect on SMTE's willingness to engage in pro-environmental knowledge transfer.
- H3: Self-efficacy (a), social norms (b), social capital (c), and credibility (d) have a positive and direct effect on SMTE's intention to behave sustainably.

Trust-based decisions: trust as the lubricating agent in knowledge transfer and action

The literature suggests that willingness to risk is regulated by volitional behaviours based on cognitive representation and the altruistic motivation to overcome existing vulnerabilities (Ma et al., 2021; Van der Werff et al., 2019). The perceived level of risk to SMTE managers is mediated by trust (Abdollahi et al., 2023); consequently, this informs a willingness of managers to take the risk to acquire specialised and contextual pro-environmental knowledge to transform their policies and procedures (Martínez-Martínez et al., 2023). This affective process may be based on a rational trust of institutional knowledge such as government guidelines (Williams & Baláž, 2021), calculative trust of the knowledge transfer process (McAllister et al., 2006) or relational trust of the tourism-specific knowledge source (Cooper, 2018).

Yet SMTE managers' trust of pro-environmental knowledge sources is conditional (Williams & Baláž, 2021). For example, pro-environmental knowledge may often be derived from tourism stakeholders such as industry peers, sectoral representatives or state agencies who may, or may not, be deemed credible (Nunkoo, 2017). Such determination of the fiduciary responsibilities of the knowledge sources reflects Van der Werff et al.'s (2019) findings that willingness to trust depends on two psychosocial elements – trust-goal setting and trust-regulation. As trust is dependent on psychosocial antecedents, trust is regulated by SMTE managers' personal values and belief that they can effect change, their influencing social norms, their trust in sustainable knowledge and finally, their trust of pro-environmental knowledge transfer partners.

Clearly, trust is a critical mechanism underlying the transfer, adoption and actioning of sustainable knowledge (Meddour et al., 2019). We argue that trust in others is a lubricant of intention, facilitating decision making, in this case, to behave sustainably on the basis of transferred knowledge.

Here, we consider if this lubricant mediates the relationship between the proposed antecedents of sustainable knowledge transfer in SMTEs (independent variables) and outcomes of the knowledge transfer process: in our case willingness and intention to behave sustainably (dependent variables).

Few studies have tested the mediating effect of trust-based decisions within a knowledge transfer setting (Schwaer et al., 2012). Despite this, there is an acceptance that trust mediates in the transfer of knowledge (Renzl, 2008). Within tourism, studies acknowledge the role of trust in the transfer of pro-environmental knowledge (Martínez-Martínez et al., 2023), yet these have been limited to conceptual assertions, and/or explorations of direct effect, thus overstating mediating effects. These studies merely argue that operational trust in knowledge transfer initiatives is a key enabler to successful knowledge transfer in tourism (Raisi et al., 2020). Others propose that SMTEs often lack key knowledge and have limited supporting resources, making them unwilling to take knowledge acquisition risks (Font et al., 2023). Equally, studies have found that inter-personal and inter-organisational trust within SMTE owners positively enhances knowledge acquisition, but often such studies are case study based and therefore have limited transferability (Makkonen et al., 2018).

This study empirically tests if trust mediates the association between the antecedents, willingness, and action of SMTE managers in pro-environmental knowledge transfer, adoption and action (Martínez-Martínez et al., 2023) (Figure 1), Hence the following hypotheses:

- H4: Trust-based decisions have a positive and direct effect on SMTE's willingness to engage in pro-environmental knowledge transfer.
- H5: Trust-based decisions have a positive and direct effect on SMTE's intention to behave sustainably.
- H6: the relationships between self-efficacy (a), social norms (b), social capital relational trust (c) and credibility rational trust (d) and willingness to engage in pro-environmental knowledge is mediated by trust-based decisions.
- H7: the relationship between self-efficacy (a), social norms (b), social capital relational trust (c) and credibility rational trust (d) and intention to behave sustainably is mediated by trust-based decisions.

Methodology

The analysis presented delves into the mediating role of trust in the transfer and adoption of pro-environmental knowledge within small and medium-sized tourism enterprises (SMTEs). Understanding this process is essential for addressing industry-wide sustainability goals. Our approach bridges a significant research gap by emphasising the mediating effects of trust, as the precise psychological and social elements that facilitate successful information transfer in SMTEs are still not well understood (Font et al., 2023). To address our hypotheses, we developed a survey modified to ensure content validity and clarity based on feedback from several academic experts in the research area and industry professionals before distribution. The survey was distributed using Prolific to reach the target respondents.

Drawing from Buhalis's (1996) conception of SMTEs, we targeted UK-based individuals who have independent ownership and/or independent decision-making roles in small hospitality, tourism, event and leisure organisations. The UK government has defined SMEs in terms of number of employees and annual income, small business (less than 50 employees and less than €10 million annual income) and medium size enterprises (less than 250 employees with less than €50 million annual income) (GOV.UK, 2023). Table 1 shows 48% of respondents who are from small enterprises with less than 50 employees and many of the respondents (51%) are from medium-sized enterprises with employees between 50 and 250. Their organisations are primarily not chain affiliated. Data collection was stopped in Prolific when we accepted and paid for 490 completed surveys during a period of three weeks (July 2022). Some surveys were rejected over concerns of quality response

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of respondent profile.

Racial/ ethnic group	*N*		Gender		
Asian	52	10.72%	Female	208	42.90%
White	278	57.32%	Male	273	56.30%
Mixed background	78	16.08%	Non-binary / third gender	3	0.60%
African/Caribbean/Other background	67	13.81%	Prefer not to say	1	0.20%
Chinese	6	1.24%	**Sectors you work in**		
Other	4	0.82%	Hospitality	233	48.00%
			Tourism	158	33.00%
Age			Event	68	14.00%
18–24	55	11.30%	Sports and Leisure	26	5.00%
25–34	190	39.20%			
35–44	147	30.30%	**Length of work**		
45–54	60	12.40%	Less than 2 years	50	10.30%
55–64	29	6.00%	2–5 years	113	23.30%
64 or above	4	0.80%	6–10	146	30.10%
Education			11–15	89	18.40%
Secondary school or below	17	3.51%	16–20	40	8.20%
College	104	21.44%	20–24	20	4.10%
Undergraduate	310	63.92%	24+	27	5.60%
Postgraduate or above	54	11%	**Your organisation size in terms of employees**		
Management roles in your job			1–49	233	48%
			50–150	183	38%
Assistant Manager	57	11.3%	151–250	69	14%
Director/CEO	26	5.40%			
Manager	294	61%	**Is your organisation chain affiliated?**		
Supervisor	78	16.10%	No	463	95%
Team Leader	30	6.20%	Yes	22	5%
Total	485	100.0%		485	100%

and response time. Eventually, 485 were used for data analysis. Hair et al. (2010) recommended a sample size higher than 200 respondents for structural equation modelling and the adoption of the ratio of 5–10 respondents per item. Hence, a sample size of 485 respondents is an adequate sample for this study.

Table 1 indicates that among the 485 respondents, 56.3% ($n = 273$) were male and 42.9% ($n = 208$) were female. In terms of age, 30% of respondents were between 35 and 44 years old, and nearly 40% of respondents were between 25 and 34 years old. A total of 48% and 33% of respondents were working in the hospitality and tourism business sectors. Over 23% and 30.1% of respondents have been working in these sectors for over 2 and 6 years respectively. Over 60% of respondents had a bachelor's degree.

Measures

The study employed a seven-point Likert scale to measure latent constructs (1 strongly disagree, to 7 strongly agree). All items had an adequate correlation with their respective constructs (see Table 2). Self-efficacy in pro-environmental behaviour was measured by the items developed by Homburg and Stolberg (2006) which we adapted to measure self-efficacy in pro-environmental behaviour of respondents with different management roles in SMTEs in the UK. The original scales of Homburg and Stolberg's (2006) measured self-efficacy regarding pollution from volunteering acquaintances in their social environment. We deleted some items regarding attitudes to environmental pollution and remained and adapted four items regarding self-confidence in dealing with environmental impact into the research context. Social norms regarding pro-environmental behaviour were assessed using the scales developed by Wang and Zhang (2020) and Shi et al. (2017). Social capital was measured by the scale developed by Liu (2018), and we adjusted the items to fit the context of pro-environmental knowledge transfer. The credibility of pro-environmental knowledge was measured by using a seven point continuum from eight dimensions which reflect the level of

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis ($N = 485$).

Factor	Items	Factor Loading	Skewness	Kurtosis	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
Self-Efficacy (SE) (belief in ability to achieve pro-environmental change based on intrinsic motivations)	SE1: I know how to reduce the everyday environmental impact of my business	0.679	−0.982	2.047	0.534	0.820	0.820
	SE2: I am comfortable in finding new ways to reduce the environmental impact of my business	0.790	−0.715	0.675			
	SE3: I usually have various ideas of how to reduce environmental impact of my business	0.774	−0.538	0.087			
	SE4: I am confident I can respond to unexpected environmental problems in my business	0.671	−0.317	−0.232			
Social Norms: (SN)	SN1: They would say I act pro-environmentally in my business	0.649	−0.430	0.354	0.517	0.851	0.863
	SN2: They think that reducing the environmental impact of my business is something I ought to do	0.679	−0.527	−0.152			
	SN3: They expect me to reduce the environmental impact of my business	0.602	−0.423	−0.202			
	SN4: They try to reduce their day-to-day environmental impact	0.760	−0.738	0.785			
	SN5: They take everyday steps to reduce their environment impact	0.787	−0.674	0.756			
	SN6: They have reduced their environmental impact at work	0.791	−0.166	0.022			
	SN7: They are very likely to reduce their environmental impact in all aspects of their lives	0.741	−0.564	0.508			
Social Capital:	SC1: In general, employees have very good relationships with each other	0.694	−0.914	1.038	0.575	0.915	0.913
	SC2: Employees are encouraged to share information that is relevant to colleagues	0.655	−1.097	1.660			
	SC3: Employees know their ideas will be listened to	0.734	−1.253	2.595			
	SC4: As the manager, I know the strengths of most colleagues and who to ask when in need	0.650	−1.139	3.019			
	SC5: Employees know their contributions are recognised	0.764	−1.086	2.020			
	SC6: Employees will always try and help others if they encounter difficulties	0.837	−0.878	1.291			

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Factor	Items	Factor Loading	Skewness	Kurtosis	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
	SC7: Employees trust colleagues to lend them a hand if they need it	0.834	−1.093	2.357			
	SC8: Employees can rely on other colleagues when they need support in their work	0.865	−0.801	1.005			
Credibility: (CB)	CB1: Dependable – 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 – Undependable	0.849	−0.822	0.890	0.523	0.895	0.915
	CB2: Honest – 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 – Dishonest	0.847	−0.959	1.062			
	CB3: Reliable – 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 – Unreliable	0.811	−1.017	1.141			
	CB4: Sincere – 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 – Insincere	0.784	−0.860	0.514			
	CB5: Experienced – 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 – Inexperienced	0.593	−0.512	−0.201			
	CB6: Knowledgeable – 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 – Unknowledgeable	0.655	−0.726	1.177			
	CB7: Qualified – 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 – Unqualified	0.527	−0.525	−0.165			
	CB8: Skilled – 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 – Unskilled	0.640	−0.537	−0.176			
Trust-based Decisions (TRUD)	TRUD1: My organisation has a strong sense of environmental integrity	0.806	−0.504	−0.027	0.564	0.837	0.833
	TRUD2: My organisation tries hard to be transparent in dealing with stakeholders	0.624	−0.757	0.646			
	TRUD3: Sound environmental principles help guide my decisions/ behaviour	0.787	−0.566	0.158			
	TRUD4: Environmental values are important to my colleagues	0.773	−0.744	0.260			
Willingness to Engage Pro-environmental Knowledge (WEK)	WEK1: I am willing to engage with new ideas that help reduce the environmental impact of my business	0.901	−0.751	0.833	0.642	0.876	0.876
	WEK2: I am willing to consider new information that can help reduce the environmental impact of my business	0.869	−0.956	1.266			
	WEK3: I am willing to collaborate with other businesses to help reduce the environmental impact of my own business	0.708	−0.869	0.869			
	WEK4: I am willing to share insights from my own business to help reduce the environmental impact of other businesses	0.708	−1.087	1.952			
Intention to Behave Sustainably (INT)	INT1: I am likely to adopt more sustainable practices in my business during the next year?	0.817	−0.983	1.289	0.764	0.907	0.903

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Factor	Items	Factor Loading	Skewness	Kurtosis	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
	INT2: I will try to adopt sustainable practices in my business during the next year	0.870	−1.169	2.314			
	INT3: I plan to adopt sustainable practices in my business the next year	0.932	−0.741	0.649			

trustworthiness of the information source and level of expertise of information based on Amyx and Bhuian (2009) who studied consumer's perceived information source credibility. The items for measuring trust-based decisions were based on Aboramadan et al. (2021) and modified to fit the research context. The measurement items developed by Liu et al. (2020) and Holste and Fields (2010) for willingness to engage pro-environmental knowledge and intention to behave sustainable were adapted and used in this study (see Table 1 for the list of measures). We consulted industry experts who mainly helped adapt statements and suggested wordings for the context of the pro-environmental behaviour of respondents operating SMTEs in the UK.

Data analysis

SPSS 28.0 and Amos 28.0, statistical estimating tools, were mainly used for data analysis. To view the profiles of respondents and find relationships between the variables, descriptive statistics were produced. Furthermore, data screening was performed to ensure that the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) assumptions were met before applying the measurement model. Amos 28.0 was also used to carry out a number of estimations, including the model-fit, factor reliability and validity, and confirmatory factor analysis. With the use of Hayes's (2017) PROCESS Macro v4.2, the bootstrapping approach with bias-corrected confidence estimates and mediation method were selected to examine the mediating impacts of trust-based decisions as depicted in the conceptual framework (Figure 1). Lastly, to produce a 95% confidence interval for the statistical significance of the projected effects, Hayes (2017) recommended using 5000 bootstrapping re-samples, and this was implemented for this study.

Results

Common method bias

Since common method variance (CMV) can negatively affect the validity of the results, a number of methods were employed to reduce CMV. First, the likelihood of socially desirable responses can be reduced by using online survey platforms and granting anonymity to respondents filling out questionnaires. Secondly, in order to identify and delete questionnaires that were filled out carelessly, attention check questions were also added to the survey design at random and the length of time spent by respondents was monitored and controlled. Lastly, Harman's single-factor test was carried out to assess the possible CMV throughout the data analysis (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). The test results indicated a single factor extracting 34.91% of total variance, which was far less than 50%. Therefore, it was concluded that CMV cannot pose a serious risk to the current research.

Measurement model

We performed a confirmatory factor analysis to evaluate the measurement quality and determine whether the data were consistent with the measurement model (Hair et al., 2010). The reliability and validity of the constructs were established based on the confirmatory factor analysis results

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and correlations.

	Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	SE	4.957	0.921	(0.731)						
2	SN	5.168	0.906	0.500**	(0.719)					
3	SC	5.760	0.782	0.312**	0.371**	(0.758)				
4	CB	5.343	1.005	0.336**	0.368**	0.499**	(0.723)			
5	TRUD	5.216	0.998	0.475**	0.608**	0.497**	0.509**	(0.751)		
6	WEK	5.982	0.775	0.379**	0.404**	0.429**	0.312**	0.337**	(0.801)	
7	INT	5.568	1.039	0.524**	0.560**	0.329**	0.378**	0.331**	0.349**	(0.874)

$N = 485$, ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). The square root of the average variances extracted in parentheses. SE = Self-Efficacy in Pro-environmental Behaviour; SN = Social Norm; SC = Social Capital; CB = Credibility; TRUD = Trust-based Decisions; WEK = Willingness to Engage Pro-environmental Knowledge; INT = Intention to Behave Sustainably

(see Table 2). Table 2 also displays the scale measurements' statistical distribution. Collier (2020) proposed, based on skewness and kurtosis values, that for a sample size larger than 200, absolute skewness values up to 2 and the range of −10 to +10 for kurtosis be considered normally distributed in a structural equation modelling using maximum likelihood estimator. Therefore, acceptable normality is suggested by the observation that the skewness values are between −1.253 and −0.317, and kurtosis values are between −0.202 and 3.019. Cronbach's alpha values for the latent constructs ranged from 0.820 to 0.915, all of which were higher than the benchmark of 0.70 (Liu et al., 2019). The composite reliability of constructs ranged from 0.820 to 0.915, indicating strong dependability for all the constructs. Most of the average variance extracted values significantly surpassed 0.50, and all standardised factor loadings were higher than the threshold value of 0.50. Additionally, discriminant analysis was evaluated by contrasting the shared variance of each pair of constructs, with the average variance extracted minimum (Liu et al., 2019). In accordance with the findings, all square roots of the average variance extracted on the diagonal were higher than the correlations between the relevant latent components which suggests good discriminant validity (see Table 3) (Liu et al., 2019).

Table 4 shows all the indices that were used to assess the fit of the confirmatory factor analysis model. The root mean square residual, standardised root mean square residual and root mean square error of approximation should be less than the recommended threshold value of 0.08, and the goodness of fit, comparative fit index, normal fit index, and the Tucker Lewis index should be higher than 0.90. Other than the goodness of fit score that is marginal to 0.90, the rest of the indices are greater than the recommended threshold value of 0.90, which signifies a strong model fit (Byrne, 1998).

Using these assessment criteria, the confirmatory factor analysis results demonstrated that the model fits the data well and can therefore be used to explain the research hypotheses (chi square = 2.085; root mean square residual = 0.052; comparative fit index = 0.945; and the Tucker Lewis index = 0.937).

Structural model

A structural equation model approach was used to test the research hypotheses associated with the conceptual model – in other words to test the validity of the antecedents in McTiernan et al.'s (2023) trust-based decision model (Figure 1). The model fit indices were applied to the structural model to test the hypotheses. The results of the indices indicate an acceptable level of model fit (chi square = 2.333; root mean square residual = 0.052; comparative fit index = 0.934; and the Tucker Lewis index = 0.923). We therefore continued the analysis to test the hypotheses. First, we hypothesised that self-efficacy (SE) (H1a), social norms (SN) (H1b), social capital (SC) (H1c), and credibility (CB) (H1d) are positively associated with trust-based decisions (TRUD). The results of the hypothesis testing indicated that SE ($\beta = 0.298$, $p < 0.001$), SN ($\beta = 0.408$, $p < 0.001$), SC ($\beta = 0.309$, $p < 0.001$), and CB ($\beta = 0.200$, $p < 0.001$) significantly and positively affect trust-based decisions (see Figure 2). Social norms (SN) were the most significant factor in determining trust-based decisions. Furthermore, as

Table 4. The fit indices of CFA model.

Measure	Abbr.	Recommended threshold	Scores
Chi-square (CMIN/DF)	χ2/df	<3.0[a]	2.085
Comparative Fit Index	CFI	>0.90[a]	0.945
Tucker-Lewis Index	TLI	>0.90[a]	0.937
The Normed Fit Index	NFI	>0.90[b]	0.900
Goodness of Fit	GFI	>0.90[a]; >0.80[b]	0.878
Adjusted Goodness of Fit	AGF	>0.80[a]	0.853
Root Mean Square Residual	RMR	<0.08[b]	0.080
Standardised Root Mean Square Residual	SRMR	<0.08[b]	0.058
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation	RMSEA	<0.08[a]	0.047

[a] = Acceptable; [b] = Marginal.

hypothesised, trust-based decisions were positively associated with willingness to engage pro-environmental knowledge (WEK) (H4) ($\beta = 0.330$, $p < 0.001$) and intention to behave sustainably (INT) (H5) ($\beta = 0.408$, $p < 0.001$).

The relations among antecedents (SE; SN, SC, and CB) and dependent variables (WEK and INT) were also tested (see Figure 3). Apart from CB (H2d), SE (H2a, $\beta = 0.180$, $p < 0.001$), SN (H2b Cβ = 0.195, $p < 0.001$) and SC (H2c, $\beta = 0.281$, $p < 0.001$) the other variables were significantly and positively associated with willingness to engage pro-environmental knowledge. Social capital was the most significant factor in determining willingness to engage pro-environmental knowledge. Other than SC (H3c), SE (H3a, $\beta = 0.292$, $p < 0.001$), SN (H3b, $\beta = 0.351$, $p < 0.001$) and CB (H3d, $\beta = 0.129$, $p < 0.01$) were significantly and positively associated with intention to behave sustainably (INT). The most important element influencing the intention to behave sustainably (INT) was social norms (SN).

The mediation analysis

To assess the mediating effects of trust-based decisions to engage pro-environmental knowledge and intention to behave sustainably, five thousand bootstrap samples were utilised to create a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (CI) (see Figure 2). If zero lies outside of the bootstrapped confidence intervals (CIs), the null hypothesis should be rejected, and it indicates a significance of indirect effect (Preacher et al., 2007).

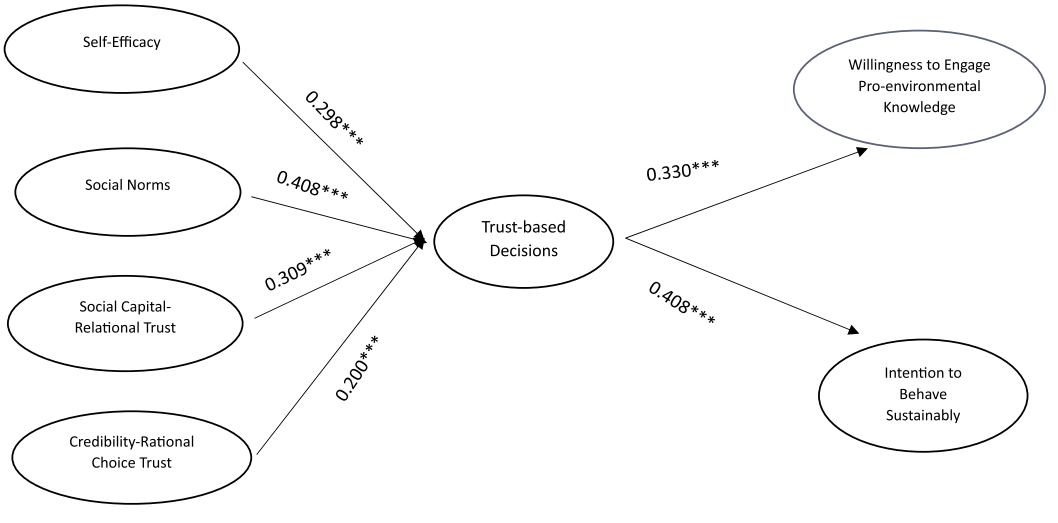

Figure 2. Conceptual model results for direct effects. Note: ***$p < 0.001$.

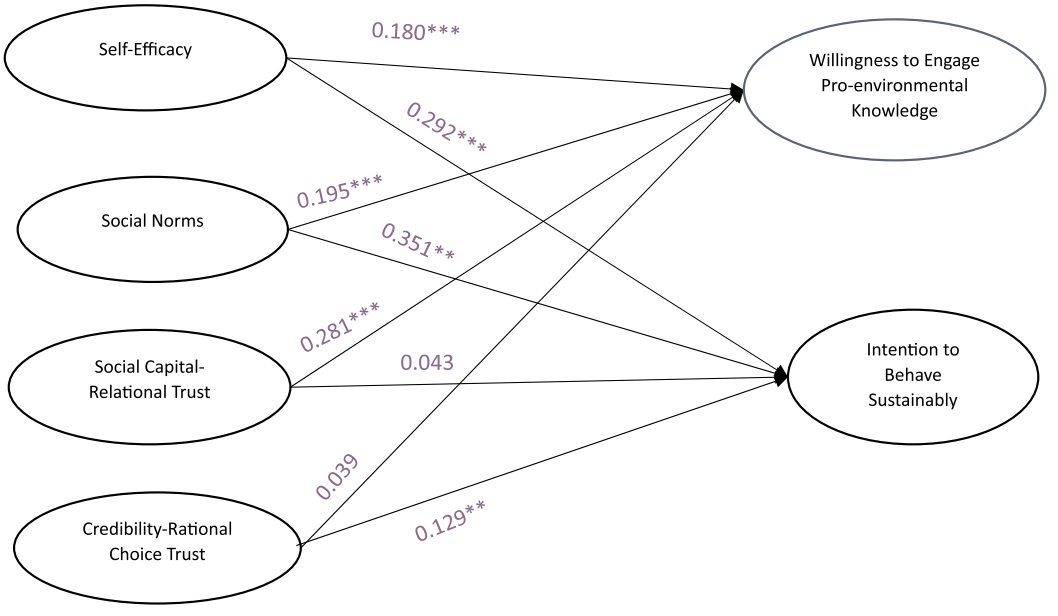

Figure 3. Conceptual model results for direct effects of antecedents on dependent variables. Note: $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$.

Table 5 presents the results of all the indirect effects of mediator trust-based decisions regarding the test of hypotheses (H6a, b, c, and d) (H7a, b, c, and d). The results show that TRUD is the mediator in relation to self-efficacy (SE) and willingness to engage in pro-environmental knowledge (WEK) (see Table 5 H6a, direct effect = 0.166, $P < 0.001$; indirect effect = 0.181, 95% CIs: 0.133–0.234). A partial mediation was suggested in the path SE-TRUD-WEK since both direct and indirect effects were significant. Thus, hypothesis H6a was supported, Similarly, a portion of the effect of the social norm (SN) on WEK was mediated through TRUD, whereas social norms (SN) still explained a portion of willingness to engage pro-environmental knowledge (WEK) that was independent of TRUD (H6b, direct effect = 0.161, $P < 0.001$; indirect effect = 0.222, 95% CIs: 0.157–0.287). Partial mediations applied to the path SC-TRUD-WEK (H6c, direct effect = 0.253, $P < 0.001$; indirect effect = 0.173, 95% CIs: 0.119–0.225), likewise, the path CB-TRUD-WEK (H6d, direct effect = 0.072, $P < 0.05$; indirect effect = 0.218, 95% CIs: 0.163–0.277), Therefore, the type of partial mediations that well supported hypotheses H6b, c, and d.

Furthermore, when an intention to behave sustainably (INT) was treated as a dependent variable, the indirect effect through TRUD as the mediator in the relation of SE and INT revealed that TRUD mediated the association, as zero was not within the lower and upper limit of the confidence intervals (see Table 5 H7a, direct effect = 0.362, $P < 0.001$; indirect effect = 0.203, 95% CIs: 0.155–0.254). Since both direct and indirect effects were significant, a partial mediation was proposed in the path SE-TRUD-INT. Thus, hypothesis H7a was supported. Similarly, a portion of the effect of social norm (SN) on INT was mediated through TRUD, whereas SN still explained a portion of INT that was independent of TRUD (H7b, direct effect = 0.390, $P < 0.001$; indirect effect = 0.232, 95% CIs: 0.174–0.289). A full mediation for the path SC-TRUD-INT was identified since the direct effect of social capital (SC) was not significant but the indirect effect was significant (H7c, direct effect = 0.070, $P > 0.05$; indirect effect = 0.276, 95% CIs: 0.220–0.333). Last but not least, a partial mediation was supported in the path CB-TRUD-INT (H7d, direct effect = 0.114, $p < 0.01$; indirect effect = 0.268, 95% CIs: 0.211–0.327) since both direct and indirect effects were significant.

Table 5. The mediating effect of trust-based decision.

Willingness to Engage Pro-environmental Knowledge (WEK) as Dependent Variable, TRUD as a mediator					
Hypotheses		*β*	*se*	LLCI	ULCI
	SE (Direct effect)	0.166***	0.037	0.092	0.240
H6a	SE-WEK (Total effect)	0.318***	0.035	0.249	0.388
	SE-TRUD-WEK (Indirect effect)	0.181	0.025	0.133	0.234
	SN (Direct effect)	0.161***	0.044	0.074	0.248
H6b	SN-WEK (Total effect)	0.357***	0.037	0.285	0.429
	SN-TRUD-WEK (Indirect effect)	0.222	0.033	0.157	0.287
	SC (Direct effect)	0.253***	0.044	0.166	0.341
H6c	SC-WEK (Total effect)	0.425***	0.041	0.345	0.505
	SC-TRUD-WEK (Indirect effect)	0.173	0.027	0.119	0.225
	CB (Direct effect)	0.072*	0.036	0.002	0.143
H6d	CB-WEK (Total effect)	0.240***	0.033	0.175	0.306
	CB-TRUD-WEK (Indirect effect)	0.218	0.029	0.163	0.277
Intention to Behave Sustainably (INT) as Dependent Variable, TRUD as a mediator					
	SE (Direct effect)	0.362***	0.045	0.274	0.449
H7a	SE-INT (Total effect)	0.591***	0.043	0.506	0.677
	SE-TRUD-INT (Indirect effect)	0.203	0.025	0.155	0.254
	SN (Direct effect)	0.390***	0.053	0.287	0.493
H7b	SN-INT (Total effect)	0.665***	0.045	0.577	0.753
	SE-TRUD-INT (Indirect effect)	0.232	0.029	0.174	0.289
	SC (Direct effect)	0.070	0.057	−0.041	0.181
H7c	SC-INT (Total effect)	0.437***	0.057	0.324	0.549
	SC-TRUD-INT (Indirect effect)	0.276	0.029	0.220	0.333
	CB (Direct effect)	0.114**	0.044	0.027	0.201
H7d	CB-INT (Total effect)	0.390***	0.044	0.305	0.476
	CB-TRUD-INT (Indirect effect)	0.268	0.029	0.211	0.327

Note: *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$. SE = Self-Efficacy; SC = social Capital; SN = Social Norms; CB = Credibility; TRUD = Trust-based Decisions; INT = Intention to Behave Sustainably; WEK = Willingness to Engage Pro-environmental Knowledge.

Discussion

The key aim of this research is to test the assumption that trust is a lubricant to knowledge transfer and sustainable actions in tourism (Cooper, 2018; Martínez-Martínez et al., 2023; Raisi et al., 2020; Shaw, 2015). In addressing calls for contextual and theoretical contributions to trust in tourism knowledge management, this research draws on the scholarship on trust to examine how, and if, SMTE managers employ a self-regulatory approach when determining the credibility and trustworthiness of pro-environmental knowledge and its source (Kornilaki et al., 2019; Kornilaki & Font, 2019; Ma et al., 2021; Van der Werff et al., 2019). This research has three significant theoretical contributions.

First, our empirical findings validate the model of McTiernan et al. (2023) confirming social norms, social capital, self-efficacy, and credibility as antecedents of trust-based decisions in SMTEs' sustainable knowledge transfer. Our findings also show parity across these antecedents of trust, and that each must be in place to create trust-based decision making. This supports Liu et al. (2020) and Li et al. (2021) who purport that successful pro-environmental knowledge transfer is dependent upon a meaningful relationship between the psycho-social variables that inform knowledge transfer decisions and actions, the SMTE context and ideals of broader sustainable tourism themes.

Second, our findings establish social norm as the most vital factor determining trust-based decisions in sustainable knowledge transfer for SMTEs. This bridges the gap between pro-environmental attitude and behaviour, clarifying the assertions by Kornilaki and Font (2019) and Chen et al. (2020) that societal norms and, in this case, sectoral comparisons, can have a greater impact on SMTE managers' contemplation and actions. Moreover, it affirms the work of Gifford (2011) and De Groot and Schuitema (2012) who rank social norms above moral obligations, and place social expectations as a method of increasing SMTE manager's implementation of pro-environmental practices. Conversely, given the strength of social norms within SMTE networks, the antecedent may have a divisive role in shaping superficial sustainable tourism practices. For example, some SMTE managers may

present a façade of sustainable practice/interest (often referred to as greenwashing) yet retain scepticism of the underlying reasons for positive action or question the credibility of the pro-environmental knowledge source (Font et al., 2023; Torres-Delgado & Saarinen, 2014).

Third, our research demonstrates that decisions based upon trust were positively associated with willingness to both engage pro-environmental knowledge and intention to behave sustainably. Such willingness and intention are a function of formal and informal internal knowledge management tools and systems (Schwaer et al., 2012), organisational trust (May et al., 2021) and senior management support (Meddour et al., 2019; Renzl, 2008). This is an important contribution, placing trust-based decisions as a predictor of both willingness and intention to behave sustainably, and is a recognition that the (conceptualised) antecedents of trust-based decisions reduce the inherent risk in inter-personal and inter-organisational knowledge transfer (Ma et al., 2021; Nunkoo, 2017). Taking this one step further, our analysis extends extant publications by demonstrating that the effect of trust-based decisions in the associations between social capital, social norm, credibility, and self-efficacy and willingness to engage in pro-environmental knowledge was significant. Similarly, the effect of trust-based decisions in the association of the (aforementioned) antecedents and intent to engage in sustainable knowledge transfer was also proven significant.

This finding is important in both the field of knowledge management and its application to tourism and hospitality. Our findings provide empirical evidence that trust is a key lubricant within the knowledge transfer process and in the crucial step that convinces SMTEs to consider and act upon new knowledge (Abdollahi et al., 2023). This lends support to the current debate surrounding the mechanisms that underline SMTE managers' individual positions and their actions/intent (Czernek, 2017; Kelliher et al., 2018; Makkonen et al., 2018). Indeed, an often cited barrier to knowledge transfer in SMTEs is their inability to apply knowledge to their particular situation (Cooper, 2018). Our findings acknowledge trust-based decisions have a propagating role between the antecedents of trust and behavioural (in)actions and intent in sustainable knowledge transfer.

Arguably we can confirm trust-based decisions as the antithesis of risk, accepting that trust begins where risk ends (Williams & Baláž, 2021). Importantly, our findings show how the antecedents of trust are indispensable in the fragile process of pro-environmental knowledge transfer and management (Gifford, 2011; Kornilaki & Font, 2019).

Practical implications

This study offers two key practical implications. First, for successful knowledge transfer and action, tourism associations and professional networks must capitalise on the influence of social norms on their members and foster the development of social embeddedness based on inter-personal and inter-organisational trust (Czernek-Marszałek, 2021; Martínez-Pérez et al., 2016), as an essential precursor to any pro-environmental conversation. This will ensure SMTE networks move towards a community of practice where inherent trust supports shared learning between SMTE members. Second, knowing that trust mediates willingness and intention to engage in sustainable initiatives should reposition how organisations implement pro-environmental knowledge transfer processes. Taking this further, ascertaining the actors who are trusted and who are credible within SMTE networks will enable SMTEs to take acceptable knowledge acquisition risks. This could include building and maintaining trust in SMTE communities through the development and management of collaborative platforms, dissemination of good practice and peer-to-peer networks. Ultimately this will reduce the criticism often associated with SMTEs' knowledge of pro-environmental issues and the resources available to them (Weidenfeld et al., 2010).

Limitations and future studies

The current study has several limitations. The use of PROLIFIC in the data collection generated a bias self-selecting sample. Consequently, any attempt to transpose these findings must be done so with

caution. Moreover, the study focused on a limited demographic – SMTEs within the UK. Also, the study was implemented as a cross-sectional study and limitations of time horizons apply. Extending the sample to enable a continent-based comparison or a more nuanced in-country (regional) analysis, may offer further insights into the antecedents placed within this model and the mediating effect of trust-based decisions within this study's context. Moreover, such contextual analysis may provide further practical insights and support regional initiatives that reflect social and sectoral norms pertinent to SMTE managers and their pro-environmental (in)action.

Having established that trust-based decisions have a mediating effect, future qualitative studies should explore how trust mediates the association between the antecedents of trust-based decision making and relationships with willingness to and intention to engage in sustainable knowledge transfer, adoption and action. This may provide a more comprehensive assessment of how trust navigates between and within stakeholders. Moreover, a qualitative study may provide further practical insights and encourage pro-environmental change within SMTEs and SMTE managers. For example, action-orientated research within a variety of SMTEs will supplement this body of knowledge and go some way to developing sustainable knowledge transfer principles for SMTE managers, owners and more widely, across relevant industry associations.

Despite assertions from Mayer et al. (1995), Garay et al. (2019) and McTiernan et al. (2019) our findings suggest that credibility was not positively associated with willingness to engage pro-environmental knowledge. Arguably this absence may reflect apathy towards scientific sources, a desensitisation of the global issue for SMTEs or indeed, apathy towards (dis)information sources in general and the ability and resources, such as time, to decipher knowledge. To unpick this narrative, further qualitative research, focusing on credibility, variability and frequency of sources, and their impact on engagement in pro-environmental behaviour is needed.

In this study, social capital was not found to be associated with intentions to engage in sustainable behaviour. This is surprising and we therefore see an opportunity for qualitative exploration of cognitive processes within social networks and their influence on the transfer of pro-environmental knowledge. Using observations and insights within established, emerging, and developing Small and Medium Tourism Enterprise networks could reveal how SMTEs respond to pro-environmental initiatives. Such inquiry would build upon the work of Jaouen and Lasch (2015) and Ogunmokun et al. (2020) by investigating the (mis)alignment of individual and organisational pro-environmental values and the efficacious dynamics of knowledge transfer within intra and inter-organisational networks.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research is to empirically test an established position in tourism research; namely, that trust facilitates knowledge transfer and absorption (Baggio, 2011; Raisi et al., 2020; Shaw & Williams, 2009). Specifically, this research explores not only *if* trust impacts interpersonal and interorganisational pro-environmental knowledge transfer, but it also seeks to determine *how* such trust is manifested and how it mediates sustainable knowledge transfer within and between industry practitioners. This study acknowledges that the development of a sustainable tourism sector necessitates individual human actions, and SMTE managers must seek appropriate knowledge as a precursor to sustainable actions (Becken & Coghlan, 2024). The contribution of this research is to empirically situate trust as a mediating influence on this decision-making process to access and action knowledge. Crucially, the study tests a model that empirically confirms four antecedents of trust-based decisions: self-efficacy, social norms, social capital and credibility.

Trust scholars have long acknowledged that trust is a psychological state (Mayer et al., 1995) where behaviours are determined by both cognitive and affective influences (Ramkissoon, 2023). Therefore, SMTE managers must not only 'think' or 'know' that engagement with pro-environmental knowledge is appropriate, but also, they must 'feel' the need or be motivated to engage. While the model recognises that SMTE managers' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations significantly influence

their willingness to engage in pro-environmental knowledge, the research posits that the desire to adhere to social norms determines their delivery of pro-environmental actions. Therefore this research places the onus on SMTE networks and associations to assist in influencing SMTE managers' volitional trust-goal setting processes as such networks are perceived as trusted partners and reduce real and perceived risks in knowledge transfer (Shaw, 2015). By empirically testing how trust mediates the acquisition and exploitation of pro-environmental knowledge transfer in tourism, this research contributes to the increasing calls for practical, solutions-based contributions to advancement in sustainable, pro-environmental tourism, namely for practitioners to advance from intention to be sustainable, to action (Dharmesti et al., 2020; Kim, 2020).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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