

SUSTAINABILITY OF TOUR OPERATORS IN AN EMERGING TOURISM DESTINATION: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM MONGOLIA

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Citation: Gantulga, S. (2026). Sustainability of tour operators in an emerging tourism destination: Empirical evidence from Mongolia. *Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites*, 68(4), 2795–2804. <https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.68415-1896>

Abstract: Sustainable tourism has emerged as a central priority in the management of tourism enterprises, particularly in developing and emerging destinations characterised by institutional fragility, infrastructure constraints, and evolving regulatory environments. Tour operators occupy a strategically important intermediary role within tourism systems, coordinating transport, accommodation, and visitor experiences while shaping the economic, environmental, and social impacts of tourism at the destination level. Despite their significance, firm-level sustainability among tour operators in emerging destinations remains comparatively underexplored in the empirical literature. This study addresses this gap by examining the internal and external determinants of sustainable operations among tour operators in Mongolia, a nature-based emerging tourism destination facing pronounced sustainability challenges. Drawing on quantitative survey data collected from 78 registered tour operator firms, the study applies reliability analysis, Pearson correlation, and multiple linear regression to test five hypothesised relationships. The findings demonstrate that management capacity ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$) and environmental responsibility ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$) are the strongest and most statistically significant predictors of sustainability performance, while social engagement with local communities also exerts a positive and significant influence ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.05$). In contrast, human resource capacity and public policy and infrastructure support exhibit positive but statistically non-significant effects, suggesting that external institutional conditions play a comparatively limited role in shaping sustainability outcomes at the firm level. The overall regression model is statistically significant ($F(5, 72) = 22.41$, $p < 0.001$) and explains 61% of the variance in sustainability performance ($R^2 = 0.61$). These results indicate that tour operators in emerging tourism destinations rely primarily on internal organisational capacities to address sustainability challenges, often compensating for institutional constraints through managerial initiative and adaptive practices. The study contributes firm-level empirical evidence from an under-researched Central Asian context and offers actionable implications for tour operators, policymakers, and industry stakeholders seeking to advance sustainability in emerging destinations.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, tour operators, management capacity, environmental responsibility, Mongolia

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is widely recognised as a catalyst for economic growth, employment, and regional development, particularly in developing and emerging economies (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; UNWTO & UNDP, 2017). Following the COVID-19 shock, international tourism has recovered rapidly, and sustainability, resilience, and inclusive development have re-emerged as central priorities (Hall et al., 2020). At the same time, accelerated recovery has intensified long-standing concerns about environmental degradation, uneven socio-economic benefits, and the long-term viability of tourism enterprises—especially in destinations where tourism expansion has outpaced institutional capacity and managerial readiness (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

Within tourism systems, tour operators hold a pivotal intermediary role by coordinating transport, accommodation, activities, and interactions between tourists and host communities. Through decisions on product design, supplier selection, group size, routing, and visitor behaviour management, tour operators shape the economic, social, and environmental impacts associated with tourism (Budeanu, 2005; Font et al., 2016). Consequently, sustainability in tour operator operations matters not only for firm performance but also for broader destination-level sustainable tourism development.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to sustainable tourism, empirical work has tended to focus on destinations, accommodation providers, and tourist behaviour, while firm-level sustainability among tour operators remains comparatively under-examined (Bramwell et al., 2017). This gap is especially apparent in developing and emerging destinations, where infrastructure constraints, institutional fragility, and policy volatility can amplify sustainability challenges faced by tourism enterprises (Hall, 2011). Although sustainability is often promoted through national or destination strategies, implementation ultimately depends on firm-level practices and managerial decisions within tourism businesses. Sustainable tourism is commonly framed through the triple-bottom-line perspective, integrating economic viability, environmental responsibility, and social equity (Elkington, 1997). When applied at organisational level, this framework requires attention to both internal

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and external determinants of sustainability. Internal determinants typically include management capacity, human resource capability, environmental practices, and engagement with local communities, while external determinants relate to public policy support, regulatory conditions, and infrastructure quality. Clarifying how these factors jointly influence sustainable operations is essential for identifying practical and context-sensitive strategies that strengthen sustainability among tour operators. In emerging destinations, tour operators often operate under resource constraints, workforce instability, and uneven institutional support, which can limit the direct transferability of sustainability models developed in mature tourism markets. As a result, evidence derived from developed contexts may not fully reflect the sustainability dynamics encountered by tour operators in developing regions. This underscores the need for firm-level, context-specific research that explains how sustainability is shaped in emerging tourism destinations.

Mongolia offers a particularly relevant setting for examining these issues. As an emerging destination characterised by vast natural landscapes and a strong reliance on nature-based tourism, Mongolia faces distinct sustainability challenges. Tour operators operate within pronounced seasonality, limited infrastructure in remote areas, high workforce turnover, and evolving regulatory frameworks. While the sector has expanded in recent years, quantitative firm-level evidence on the sustainability of tour operator operations remains limited. Against this background, this study examines the internal and external determinants of sustainable operations among tour operators in an emerging tourism destination, using Mongolia as the empirical context. Specifically, the study tests the effects of management capacity, human resource capacity, environmental responsibility, social engagement with local communities, and public policy and infrastructure support on sustainability outcomes. By providing firm-level quantitative evidence from an under-researched context, the study contributes to the sustainable tourism management literature and offers actionable insights for tour operators, policymakers, and industry stakeholders seeking to advance sustainability in developing and emerging destinations.

Sustainable tourism has emerged as a central theme in tourism research in response to growing concerns about environmental degradation, social inequality, and the long-term economic viability of tourism destinations (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). The concept is most commonly conceptualised through the triple-bottom-line framework, which emphasises the integration of economic sustainability, environmental protection, and social responsibility within tourism development (Elkington, 1997). This framework has been widely applied to assess sustainability at both destination and organisational levels. Within the tourism value chain, tour operators occupy a strategically important yet frequently under-researched position. As intermediaries, tour operators coordinate transport, accommodation, activities, and interactions between tourists and host communities. Their operational decisions directly influence patterns of resource use, visitor behaviour, environmental impacts, and the distribution of economic benefits within destinations (Budeanu, 2005; Font et al., 2016).

Consequently, the sustainability of tour operator operations has significant implications not only for firm-level performance but also for destination-level sustainability outcomes. Despite this strategic role, empirical research on sustainability among tour operators remains limited, particularly in developing and emerging tourism destinations. Existing studies have largely concentrated on destination governance, accommodation sector practices, or tourist behaviour, leaving firm-level sustainability dynamics among tour operators comparatively underexplored (Bramwell et al., 2017).

This gap is especially pronounced in contexts characterised by institutional constraints, limited infrastructure, and evolving regulatory environments. Management capacity is widely recognised as a fundamental determinant of organisational sustainability. In tourism enterprises, managerial competence influences strategic planning, resource allocation, innovation adoption, and the integration of sustainability objectives into operational routines (Leonidou et al., 2015).

Strong management capacity enables firms to respond proactively to environmental challenges and market uncertainty. For tour operators, management capacity is particularly critical due to the complexity of coordinating multiple suppliers and stakeholders across the tourism value chain. Managers with effective leadership and decision-making capabilities are better positioned to implement environmentally responsible practices, maintain service quality, and ensure long-term operational viability (Garay & Font, 2012; Hassan, 2000). Evidence from developing tourism economies further supports this view. Amoah et al. (2023) found that entrepreneurial competency, alongside price sensitivity and site maintenance, had a positive and significant effect on the competitive sustainability of tourism SMEs in Ghana. Similarly, Chowdhury et al. (2024) demonstrated that management strategies oriented towards resilience and supply chain coordination are critical for sustaining tourism operations in the face of external disruptions. Gössling & Reinhold (2025) identified management-related barriers, pressures, and incentives as important influences on tourism SMEs' engagement with climate action.

More recently, Kokkranikal et al. (2025) demonstrated that managerial resilience and adaptive capacity are central to tour operators' long-term recovery and sustainability, particularly in the aftermath of disruptive external events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Their findings underscore the critical importance of strong management capacity not only for operational continuity but also for strategic transformation in emerging tourism contexts.

H1: Management capacity has a positive effect on the sustainability of tour operators' operations.

Human resource capacity represents a key intangible asset within tourism enterprises. Employee skills, training, and organisational support contribute to service quality, operational efficiency, and the effective implementation of sustainability practices (Baum, 2006). In service-intensive sectors such as tour operations, human resources play an important role in shaping both customer experiences and organisational outcomes. However, in emerging tourism destinations, tour operators often face challenges associated with seasonal employment, workforce instability, and limited access to formal training opportunities (UNWTO, 2023). These contextual constraints may reduce the extent to which human resource capacity translates into measurable sustainability outcomes. Recent studies have reinforced this understanding. Baum et al. (2020) highlighted the structural vulnerability of the tourism and hospitality workforce during the COVID-19 crisis, underscoring the importance of workforce considerations for organisational resilience.

Khurana & Ataniyazova (2024) examined human resource management in Uzbekistan's tourism sector and identified workforce and institutional challenges relevant to an emerging Central Asian context. Bindawas (2025) further found that both soft and hard employee skills significantly contribute to sustainable tourism development, underscoring the importance of targeted workforce development in service-intensive tourism enterprises.

H2: Human resource capacity has a positive effect on the sustainability of tour operators' operations.

Environmental responsibility constitutes a core dimension of sustainability within tourism enterprises. For tour operators, this involves practices such as minimising environmental footprints, promoting responsible tourist behaviour, and collaborating with environmentally conscious suppliers (Budeanu, 2007). These practices are particularly important in nature-based tourism contexts, where environmental degradation directly threatens the resource base upon which tourism activities depend. Previous research indicates that environmentally responsible practices can enhance organisational legitimacy, improve market positioning, and support long-term business sustainability (Font & McCabe, 2017).

More recent empirical evidence has further substantiated these relationships. Baloch et al. (2023) found that environmental responsibility, when supported by government policy interventions, significantly enhances sustainable ecotourism development in emerging destinations facing institutional constraints. Agarwal et al. (2024), in a comprehensive review of four decades of sustainable tourism research, identified environmental responsibility at the firm level as the most consistently studied and empirically supported dimension of organisational sustainability. Chen & Cheung (2025) showed that perceived biodiverse aesthetic quality in nature-based destinations contributes to visitor satisfaction and pro-environmental behaviour, reinforcing the market relevance of environmental stewardship.

H3: Environmental responsibility has a positive effect on the sustainability of tour operators' operations.

Social sustainability emphasises equitable benefit distribution and the maintenance of positive relationships between tourism enterprises and host communities. Tour operators interact directly with local communities through employment, sourcing, and the design of tourism experiences. Meaningful engagement with local stakeholders can enhance social acceptance and reduce the likelihood of conflict (Scheyvens, 1999). Recent research has expanded this understanding considerably. Ngo & Creutz (2022) proposed an integrated methodological approach for assessing community-based tourism sustainability in Hoi An, Vietnam, and identified full community participation and support among the critical factors for sustainable community-based tourism development. Krittayarangroj et al. (2023), in a bibliometric review spanning three decades of community-based tourism research, identified stakeholder participation and decision-making among the major research foci in sustainable community-based tourism. Reindrawati (2023) further highlighted that structural barriers to community participation, including limited access to information and weak decision-making frameworks, are particularly prevalent in developing country tourism contexts, reinforcing the importance of active engagement strategies by tour operators. Empirical studies suggest that tourism enterprises that actively collaborate with local communities are more likely to achieve social legitimacy and operational stability (Dodds & Butler, 2019). Supporting this view, Manhas et al. (2021) found that community involvement mediates the relationship between responsible tourism practices and the quality of life of destination communities, highlighting the centrality of social engagement in achieving sustainable outcomes at both firm and destination levels.

H4: Social engagement with local communities has a positive effect on the sustainability of tour operators' operations.

External institutional conditions play an important role in shaping the sustainability of tourism enterprises. Public policies related to tourism regulation, environmental protection, and infrastructure development can either facilitate or constrain sustainable business practices (Hall, 2011). Adequate transport infrastructure and clear regulatory frameworks are particularly important for tour operators operating in emerging tourism destinations. Álvarez-Albelo & Martínez-González (2024) used a theoretical destination-card model to show that a cooperative arrangement between a public destination management organisation and a foreign tour operator can maximise destination profits under the conditions examined, highlighting the relevance of coordination for economic sustainability. Nevertheless, policy inconsistency, weak enforcement mechanisms, and infrastructure deficiencies may limit the effectiveness of sustainability initiatives undertaken by tour operators (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Recent evidence further underscores the centrality of institutional frameworks in shaping tour operator sustainability. The OECD (2024), in its analysis of tourism trends and policies across fifty countries, identified coordinated government policy and infrastructure investment as indispensable enablers of sustainable tourism development, particularly in destinations where market failures and institutional gaps are most pronounced. Badoc-Gonzales et al. (2022) demonstrated through a systematic review that policy support mechanisms, including regulatory frameworks, public financing, and institutional capacity building, are critical catalysts for destination-level resilience and tourism SME sustainability. These findings collectively suggest that while internal organisational capabilities remain primary drivers of sustainable operations, the external policy environment exerts a significant enabling or constraining influence on firm-level sustainability outcomes.

H5: Public policy and infrastructure support have a positive effect on the sustainability of tour operators' operations.

Based on the reviewed literature, this study proposes a conceptual framework in which the sustainability of tour operators' operations is influenced by both internal and external determinants. Internal determinants include management capacity, human resource capacity, environmental responsibility, and social engagement with local communities. External determinants are represented by public policy and infrastructure support. The framework assumes that internal organisational capacities play a primary role in shaping sustainability outcomes, while external institutional conditions provide a contextual environment that may either enable or constrain firm-level sustainability practices. This conceptualisation provides the basis for empirically testing the proposed hypotheses within the context of an emerging tourism destination. The proposed relationships are summarised in Figure 1.

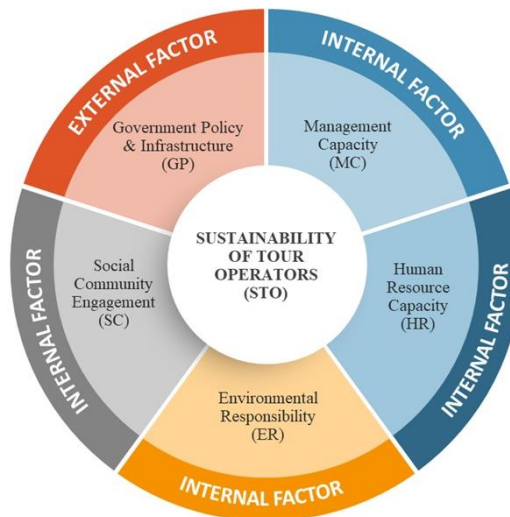


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Sustainability of Tour Operators (Source: Author's own)

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

This study employed a quantitative research design to examine the internal and external determinants of sustainable operations among tour operators in an emerging tourism destination. A positivist research orientation was adopted, as the objective was to empirically test hypothesised relationships between clearly defined constructs using numerical data. Quantitative approaches are widely applied in tourism and sustainability research to identify patterns, assess relationships among variables, and generate explanatory insights at the organisational level.

A cross-sectional survey design was utilised to collect primary data from tour operators operating in Mongolia. This design enabled the systematic assessment of sustainability-related practices and influencing factors at a single point in time and is consistent with previous firm-level empirical studies conducted in emerging tourism contexts.

Population and sample

The target population comprised registered tour operator firms operating in Mongolia. Tour operators were selected as the unit of analysis due to their central role in organising tourism activities, coordinating service providers, and influencing destination-level sustainability outcomes. Data were collected from 78 tour operator firms using a non-probability sampling approach. Given the relatively small size of the tour operator sector and access constraints, purposive and convenience sampling techniques were applied. Survey respondents included firm owners, managers, and senior staff members who possessed sufficient knowledge of their organisations' operational practices and sustainability-related activities.

Although the sample size is modest, it is comparable to those used in similar firm-level studies in emerging tourism destinations and is considered adequate for correlation and regression-based statistical analysis. The study is primarily explanatory in nature, focusing on identifying relationships among key variables rather than generating predictive models.

Data collection procedure

Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire developed based on an extensive review of the literature on sustainable tourism, tour operator management, and organisational sustainability. Measurement items were adapted from established studies and refined to reflect the operational realities of tour operators in an emerging tourism destination.

The survey was administered both electronically and through direct distribution, depending on respondents' accessibility and preferences. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed that the data would be used solely for academic research purposes. To encourage candid responses, confidentiality and anonymity were assured throughout the data collection process.

Measurement of variables

All constructs were operationalised using multiple-item scales adapted from prior empirical studies. Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). Sustainability of tour operator operations was measured using items capturing economic viability, environmental responsibility, and social considerations. Management capacity assessed managerial competence, strategic planning ability, and decision-making effectiveness. Human resource capacity measured employee skills, training, and organisational support for workforce development. Environmental responsibility captured the extent to which tour operators implemented environmentally responsible operational practices. Social engagement with local communities reflected collaboration with local stakeholders, community involvement, and support for local development initiatives. Public policy and infrastructure support assessed respondents' perceptions of regulatory frameworks, government support, and infrastructure adequacy.

Reliability analysis

The internal consistency of the measurement scales was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. All constructs

exceeded the recommended threshold value of 0.70, indicating satisfactory reliability. These results confirm that the measurement items consistently captured the intended constructs and were suitable for subsequent statistical analysis.

Data analysis techniques

Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were first employed to summarise the characteristics of respondents and the main study variables. Pearson correlation analysis was then used to examine the strength and direction of relationships among the variables. To test the proposed hypotheses, multiple regression analysis was performed, with sustainability of tour operator operations specified as the dependent variable and internal and external determinants included as independent variables. This analytical approach enabled the assessment of the relative influence of each predictor while controlling for the effects of other variables in the model.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research process. Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were fully informed of the purpose of the research. No personal identifiers were collected, and all data were treated confidentially and used exclusively for academic purposes. The study adhered to standard ethical guidelines applicable to social science research.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarise the characteristics of the main constructs. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for each variable. Management capacity ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.61$) and environmental responsibility ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.58$) recorded the highest mean values among the independent variables, indicating relatively strong internal organisational engagement with sustainability-related practices. Social engagement with local communities also demonstrated a moderately high mean ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.63$). In contrast, public policy and infrastructure support showed a comparatively lower mean score ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.74$), reflecting perceived institutional constraints within the external environment. Human resource capacity displayed moderate levels ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.67$). The dependent variable, sustainability of tour operators' operations, reported a mean value of 3.76 ($SD = 0.59$), suggesting a generally positive orientation toward sustainable business practices among surveyed firms.

Reliability analysis

Internal consistency of the measurement scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. As shown in Table 1, all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, confirming satisfactory reliability. The reliability values indicate that the measurement instruments demonstrate strong internal consistency and are appropriate for further inferential analysis.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients (Source: Author's survey data, 2025)

Variables	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
Sustainability of operations	3.76	0.59	0.84
Management capacity	3.84	0.61	0.81
Human resource capacity	3.48	0.67	0.78
Environmental responsibility	3.79	0.58	0.85
Social engagement	3.65	0.63	0.80
Public policy & infrastructure support	3.21	0.74	0.76

Correlation analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the bivariate relationships among the study variables. Sustainability performance was positively correlated with management capacity ($r = 0.64$, $p < 0.01$), environmental responsibility ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$), and social engagement ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.01$). Human resource capacity showed a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.32$, $p < 0.05$), while public policy and infrastructure support demonstrated a weaker association ($r = 0.26$, $p < 0.05$).

None of the intercorrelations exceeded 0.70, and variance inflation factor (VIF) values ranged between 1.32 and 2.48), indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern.

Regression analysis

A multiple linear regression analysis was performed to test the proposed hypotheses, with sustainability of operations specified as the dependent variable and the five determinants entered simultaneously as independent variables. The regression results are presented in Table 2. The overall regression model was statistically significant: $F(5, 72) = 22.41$, $p < 0.001$. The model explained 61% of the variance in sustainability performance: $R^2 = 0.61$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.58$.

Table 2. Multiple regression results (Source: Author's survey data, 2025)

Predictor	β	t-value	p-value
Management capacity	0.42	4.98	<0.001
Human resource capacity	0.12	1.56	0.123
Environmental responsibility	0.31	3.87	<0.001
Social engagement	0.19	2.45	0.017
Public policy & infrastructure support	0.09	1.21	0.229

The findings indicate that management capacity ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$) and environmental responsibility ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$) are strong and statistically significant predictors of sustainability performance. Social engagement also demonstrates a positive and significant effect ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.05$), though with a smaller coefficient.

Human resource capacity and public policy support exhibit positive but statistically insignificant effects. These findings suggest that internal organisational governance mechanisms exert a more substantial influence on sustainability outcomes than external institutional factors in the Mongolian tourism context.

Summary of hypothesis testing

Based on the regression analysis:

H1 (Management capacity $\rightarrow$ Sustainability): Supported

H2 (Human resource capacity $\rightarrow$ Sustainability): Not supported

H3 (Environmental responsibility $\rightarrow$ Sustainability): Supported

H4 (Social engagement $\rightarrow$ Sustainability): Supported

H5 (Public policy & infrastructure support $\rightarrow$ Sustainability): Not supported. The empirical results confirm that sustainability among tour operators in an emerging tourism destination is primarily driven by internal managerial and environmental commitments, while external institutional support remains comparatively weak.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the internal and external determinants of sustainable operations among tour operators in an emerging tourism destination, using Mongolia as an empirical context. The findings provide clear evidence that sustainability outcomes among tour operators are driven primarily by internal organisational factors, while external institutional conditions play a supportive but less influential role. This section discusses the findings in relation to existing literature and situates them within broader debates on sustainable tourism development in developing and emerging contexts.

The results indicate that management capacity is the most influential determinant of sustainable tour operator operations. This finding is consistent with prior studies emphasising the central role of managerial competence in integrating sustainability into business strategies and operational decision-making (Garay & Font, 2012; Hassan, 2000).

In emerging tourism destinations, where institutional support mechanisms may be limited, fragmented, or inconsistently enforced, effective management becomes particularly critical. Strong managerial capacity enables tour operators to allocate resources strategically, coordinate complex stakeholder relationships, and balance short-term economic pressures with long-term sustainability objectives. Beyond its direct influence, management capacity appears to function as a central enabling mechanism within the organisational sustainability framework. Managers with higher levels of competence are more likely to embed sustainability principles into organisational routines, including supplier selection, product design, risk management, and employee supervision. In this sense, management capacity may exert both direct and indirect effects on sustainability outcomes by amplifying the effectiveness of other sustainability-related practices, such as environmental responsibility, social engagement, and human resource development. This finding reinforces institutional and resource-based perspectives, which emphasise the role of managerial agency and internal capabilities in shaping firm behaviour under conditions of institutional uncertainty. The significant positive effect of environmental responsibility further reinforces the importance of firm-level commitment to sustainability. Tour operators that implement environmentally responsible practices appear better positioned to sustain their operations over time. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that environmental responsibility enhances organisational legitimacy, strengthens market positioning, and contributes to long-term competitiveness (Font & McCabe, 2017). In nature-based tourism contexts such as Mongolia, environmental stewardship is especially important, as the long-term viability of tour operations is directly linked to the preservation of natural landscapes and ecosystems that form the core tourism attraction.

Environmental responsibility may also be understood as both an ethical commitment and a strategic response to evolving market expectations. As international tourism markets increasingly favour responsible, low-impact, and environmentally sensitive travel experiences, tour operators operating in fragile natural environments may perceive sustainability practices as essential for maintaining destination appeal and securing future demand.

This market-driven orientation highlights the strategic dimension of environmental responsibility and further underscores the importance of internal organisational decision-making in shaping sustainable outcomes. In this regard, sustainability practices are not merely compliance-driven but are increasingly integrated into competitive strategies. Social engagement with local communities also emerged as a significant determinant of sustainable operations, although its effect was comparatively weaker than that of management capacity and environmental responsibility. This result supports earlier studies highlighting the role of community engagement in achieving social legitimacy, reducing conflict, and enhancing the resilience of tourism enterprises (Dodds & Butler, 2019; Scheyvens, 1999). Positive relationships with local communities can facilitate access to local knowledge, labour, and cultural resources, contributing to more stable operating conditions and improved visitor experiences. The relatively modest effect size observed for social engagement may reflect structural and contextual constraints faced by tour operators in emerging tourism destinations. Limited financial resources, weak institutional frameworks for community participation, and uneven benefit-sharing mechanisms may restrict the depth and continuity of community engagement initiatives. While tour operators may recognise the importance of social sustainability, practical limitations may hinder its full integration into business operations. This suggests that social sustainability outcomes depend not only on firm-level intentions but also on broader governance arrangements and institutional support structures that shape opportunities for meaningful community participation.

In contrast, human resource capacity demonstrated a positive but statistically non-significant effect on sustainability outcomes. Although the relationship was positive, its weaker influence suggests that workforce-related factors may not directly translate into sustainable operations in contexts characterised by seasonal employment, labour mobility, and limited access to formal training opportunities. This finding is consistent with studies indicating that human resource capacity may exert an indirect influence on sustainability through managerial practices rather than acting as a primary driver (Baum, 2006). For tour operators in emerging tourism destinations, investment in human resources may therefore require complementary managerial strategies, targeted short-term training, and longer-term workforce planning to generate meaningful sustainability benefits. Regarding external factors, public policy and infrastructure support exhibited a positive but relatively weak relationship with sustainable operations. This finding aligns with existing literature highlighting the challenges faced by tourism enterprises operating in environments marked by policy inconsistency, limited infrastructure development, and weak regulatory enforcement (Hall, 2011; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). While supportive institutional conditions remain important, the results suggest that tour operators cannot rely solely on external support mechanisms to achieve sustainability objectives. Instead, internal organisational capabilities play a more decisive role in enabling firms to adapt to institutional constraints and operational uncertainty. Taken together, the findings indicate that sustainable tour operator operations in emerging tourism destinations are shaped primarily by internal organisational capacities rather than external institutional conditions. This pattern reflects the broader reality of tourism development in developing contexts, where enterprises often compensate for institutional gaps through managerial initiative, organisational learning, and adaptive practices. From a theoretical perspective, the results provide strong empirical support for the application of the triple-bottom-line framework at the organisational level, while also highlighting the uneven influence of its economic, environmental, and social dimensions in practice. Importantly, the dominance of internal factors observed in this study suggests that sustainability frameworks should be interpreted in a context-sensitive manner. Rather than assuming uniform applicability across destinations, sustainability models must account for variations in institutional strength, market maturity, and organisational capacity. By focusing on tour operators as intermediaries within the tourism system, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how sustainability principles are translated into operational practice in emerging tourism destinations.

These findings also have broader implications for understanding sustainability governance within tourism systems. Tour operators function as key intermediaries who translate abstract sustainability principles into concrete operational practices. Unlike accommodation providers or destination management organisations, tour operators operate across multiple spatial scales and stakeholder networks, linking tourists, suppliers, communities, and destinations. As such, their sustainability practices are shaped not only by external regulations but also by their internal capacity to manage complexity, uncertainty, and interdependence within the tourism value chain. In emerging tourism destinations, this intermediary role becomes particularly salient. Weak institutional enforcement, limited infrastructure, and fragmented governance structures may reduce the effectiveness of formal sustainability policies. Under such conditions, tour operators are often required to exercise discretion and managerial judgement in determining how sustainability principles are implemented in practice. The findings of this study suggest that internal organisational capacities enable tour operators to compensate for institutional gaps, reinforcing the importance of firm-level agency in sustainability governance.

The dominance of internal factors observed in this study also contributes to ongoing debates regarding the relative roles of regulation and voluntary action in promoting sustainable tourism. While regulatory frameworks and public infrastructure remain essential components of sustainability transitions, the results indicate that voluntary, internally driven initiatives may play a more immediate role in shaping sustainability outcomes at the firm level in developing contexts. This does not diminish the importance of policy intervention but rather highlights the need for complementary approaches that combine external regulation with internal capacity-building. From a theoretical standpoint, the findings encourage a re-examination of sustainability models that implicitly assume strong institutional environments. In contexts where regulatory capacity is limited, sustainability outcomes may depend more heavily on organisational leadership, managerial values, and strategic orientation. This suggests that sustainability research should pay greater attention to micro-level organisational processes and decision-making dynamics, particularly in emerging and transitional economies.

The findings further suggest that sustainability should be viewed as a dynamic and adaptive process rather than a fixed set of practices. Tour operators operating in volatile environments may adopt incremental and context-specific sustainability strategies, adjusting their practices in response to market conditions, environmental pressures, and stakeholder expectations. This adaptive perspective aligns with evolutionary approaches to organisational sustainability, which emphasise learning, experimentation, and continuous improvement. Importantly, the Mongolian context highlights the interaction between natural resource dependence and organisational sustainability. As a destination heavily reliant on nature-based tourism, Mongolia presents a setting in which environmental degradation poses direct risks to business continuity. Under such conditions, environmental responsibility becomes not only a normative concern but also a pragmatic business strategy. The findings suggest that tour operators who recognise this interdependence are more likely to integrate sustainability into their core operations. Comparing Mongolia with other emerging tourism destinations further contextualises these findings. Research on Indian tour operators shows that resilience and recovery after COVID-19 depended on interrelated crisis-management and recovery strategies, illustrating the importance of organisational adaptability (Kokkranikal et al., 2025). In Uzbekistan, Khurana & Ataniyazova (2024) documented human-resource and institutional challenges affecting tourism-sector development. In Ghana, Amoah et al. (2023) found that price sensitivity, site maintenance, and entrepreneurial competency contributed to competitive sustainability among tourism SMEs. Across these settings, the evidence indicates that firm-level capabilities interact with destination-specific institutional conditions, reinforcing the need for context-sensitive approaches to sustainable tourism in emerging economies.

The relatively weaker influence of social engagement and human resource capacity may also be interpreted in light of contextual constraints. In emerging destinations, limited financial resources and seasonal labour markets may restrict the scope of social and workforce-related sustainability initiatives. However, these dimensions should not be viewed as unimportant. Rather, their impact may materialise over longer time horizons or require supportive institutional frameworks to become fully effective. Overall, this study underscores the importance of adopting a context-sensitive approach to sustainable tourism research and practice. By demonstrating that internal organisational capacities play a decisive role in shaping sustainability outcomes among tour operators in an emerging destination, the findings challenge one-size-fits-all models of sustainability and highlight the need for tailored strategies that reflect local institutional realities. Future research should continue to explore how organisational agency, institutional environments, and market dynamics interact to influence sustainability trajectories within tourism systems.

The findings of this study offer several practical and policy-relevant implications for tourism practitioners, policymakers, and industry stakeholders operating in emerging tourism destinations. By clarifying the relative importance of internal and external determinants of sustainability, the study provides guidance on how limited resources and strategic efforts can be prioritised more effectively. The results highlight the critical role of management capacity in achieving sustainable tour operator operations. Tour operators should prioritise strengthening managerial competencies related to strategic planning, decision-making, risk management, and sustainability integration. In contexts where institutional support is limited, strong internal leadership becomes a key driver of organisational resilience and long-term viability.

The significant influence of environmental responsibility indicates that sustainability should be embedded within core operational processes rather than treated as a peripheral activity. Practices such as minimising environmental footprints, promoting responsible tourist behaviour, implementing waste reduction measures, and working with environmentally responsible suppliers can enhance operational efficiency while strengthening market competitiveness. These measures may also align tour products with increasing international demand for responsible and nature-based tourism experiences.

Although social engagement with local communities demonstrated a comparatively weaker effect, it remains an essential component of sustainable tourism development. Tour operators are encouraged to invest in long-term relationships with local stakeholders through local employment, sourcing, and community-based tourism initiatives. Strengthened community engagement can enhance social acceptance, reduce operational risks, and contribute to destination authenticity.

The positive but statistically non-significant effect of human resource capacity suggests the need for more targeted and flexible workforce development strategies. While seasonality may limit long-term training investments, short-term capacity-building programmes, on-the-job learning, and internal knowledge-sharing can improve service quality and sustainability awareness among employees. From a policy perspective, the relatively weak influence of public policy and infrastructure support highlights the importance of improving regulatory clarity, policy consistency, and infrastructure development. Policymakers should focus on creating stable and predictable policy environments that enable tour operators to plan and invest in sustainability-oriented practices with greater confidence. Tourism authorities and government agencies can support sustainable tourism development by offering targeted training programmes, financial incentives, and certification schemes tailored to the needs of tour operators. Practical tools, sustainability guidelines, and best-practice frameworks may further facilitate implementation at the firm level. Industry associations and professional bodies may contribute by promoting collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and collective learning among tour operators. Joint initiatives, such as industry-wide training programmes or voluntary sustainability standards, can strengthen sector-wide resilience and support more consistent sustainability practices across emerging tourism destinations.

In the specific context of Mongolia, these policy implications carry additional urgency. The Mongolia National Tourism Strategy should explicitly incorporate firm-level sustainability capacity-building as a strategic priority, moving beyond destination-level marketing goals towards measurable organisational performance standards. The Ministry of Environment and Tourism could establish a national sustainability certification scheme for tour operators, offering financial incentives and preferential access to international partnerships for certified firms. Given the dominance of internal organisational factors in driving sustainability outcomes, investment in management training programmes, particularly targeting small and micro tour operators operating in remote and nature-based tourism areas, would yield the most direct returns. Additionally, public-private cooperation mechanisms should be strengthened to reduce the infrastructure and regulatory gaps that currently constrain the effectiveness of firm-level sustainability efforts, particularly in areas relating to waste management, transport infrastructure, and community benefit-sharing frameworks (Badoc-Gonzales et al., 2022; OECD, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study examined the internal and external determinants of sustainable operations among tour operators in an emerging tourism destination, using Mongolia as an empirical context. Drawing on quantitative survey data collected from 78 tour operator firms, the study provides firm-level empirical evidence on the factors shaping sustainability outcomes within tour operator operations. By focusing on organisational-level determinants, the study responds to calls for more empirical research on sustainability practices among tourism intermediaries in developing and emerging destinations.

The findings demonstrate that internal organisational capacities, particularly management capacity and environmental responsibility, play a dominant role in influencing sustainable operations among tour operators. Social engagement with local communities also contributes positively to sustainability outcomes, although its influence is comparatively weaker. In contrast, human resource capacity and public policy and infrastructure support exhibit more limited effects. These results suggest that tour operators in emerging tourism destinations rely primarily on internal capabilities to address sustainability challenges, often compensating for institutional constraints through managerial initiative, organisational learning, and adaptive practices.

From a theoretical perspective, the study provides empirical support for the application of the triple-bottom-line framework at the organisational level within an emerging tourism destination context. While economic, environmental, and social dimensions of sustainability are all relevant, the findings highlight their uneven influence in practice. The prominence of internal organisational factors underscores the importance of managerial agency in translating sustainability principles into operational outcomes, particularly in environments characterised by limited institutional support.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional research design limits the ability to capture changes in sustainability practices and organisational behaviour over time. Second, the sample size restricts the generalisability of the findings beyond the specific context examined. Third, the reliance on self-reported survey data may introduce response bias, as respondents' perceptions may not fully reflect actual operational practices. Fourth, the use of a non-probability sampling approach, while pragmatically justified by the limited size and accessibility of Mongolia's registered tour operator sector, may not fully represent the diversity of operational contexts within the industry. Fifth, the operationalisation of sustainability through perceptual Likert-scale items captures subjective assessments rather than objectively verified sustainability performance metrics. Future studies may benefit from incorporating objective indicators, such as environmental certifications or community benefit-sharing records, to complement self-reported measures. Sixth, the study does not account for potential moderating effects of firm age, ownership structure, or international market orientation, all of which may influence how internal and external sustainability determinants operate in practice. Addressing these limitations in future research would significantly enhance the methodological rigour and explanatory scope of firm-level sustainability studies in emerging tourism destinations.

Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal research designs to examine how sustainability practices among tour operators evolve over time. Comparative studies across multiple emerging tourism destinations would further enhance understanding of how institutional, cultural, and market contexts shape the relative importance of internal and external sustainability determinants. In addition, qualitative research approaches, such as in-depth interviews and case studies, could provide richer insights into managerial decision-making processes, stakeholder relationships, and the practical challenges associated with implementing sustainability initiatives at the firm level.

Overall, this study contributes to the sustainable tourism literature by highlighting the central role of tour operators in advancing sustainability within emerging tourism destinations. By identifying the key organisational and institutional factors influencing sustainable operations, the findings offer practical guidance for tour operators seeking to strengthen their internal capacities and inform policy efforts aimed at creating more supportive environments for sustainable tourism development in developing contexts.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.G.; methodology, S.G.; formal analysis, S.G.; investigation, S.G.; data curation, S.G.; writing - original draft preparation, S.G.; writing - review and editing, S.G.; visualization, S.G.; project administration. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding. The APC was funded by the author.

Institutional Review Board Statement: No prior Institutional Review Board or Ethics Committee approval was obtained for this study. The questionnaire collected organisation-level information concerning the management and operational practices of tour operator firms from company representatives acting in their professional capacity and did not collect direct personal identifiers or sensitive personal data. Participation was voluntary, responses were treated confidentially, and the results are reported only in aggregate form. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed of the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of participation; completion of the questionnaire constituted informed consent.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Acknowledgements: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Use of Generative AI: During the final proofreading and revision of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with language editing, reference verification and correction, and drafting responses to editorial comments. All AI-assisted output was reviewed and verified by the author, who takes full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the final manuscript.

Abbreviations: ER, environmental responsibility; GP, government policy and infrastructure; HR, human resource capacity; MC, management capacity; OECD, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; SC, social engagement with local communities; SMEs, small and medium-sized enterprises; SPSS, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences; STO, sustainability of tour operators; UNDP, United Nations Development Programme; UNWTO, World Tourism Organization; VIF, variance inflation factor.

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