Can co-creating a "slow destination" image boost sustainability?

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to determine whether a "slow tourism" image, coupled with value co-creation, can help develop sustainable tourist destinations. The study adapts a "slow destination image" scale and proposes that online value co-creation can be a valid strategy in the quest to encourage pro-environmental behaviors among visitors. A quantitative empirical study is conducted on a sample of Spanish domestic tourists (n = 681) and a covariance-based structural equation modeling analysis is performed. The findings of the study add value to the literature, providing empirical evidence that a "slow destination" image has a positive effect on tourist pro-environmental behavior and that online value co-creation has a positive and significant effect on "slow destination" image and tourist pro-environmental behavior. The study will also be of practical use to destination/tourism agents, both public and private, by indicating how to develop a type of tourism—slow tourism—and a marketing strategy—online value co-creation—that are useful for building sustainability and applicable to any tourist destination.

1. Introduction

Given that tourism is known to produce a negative environmental impact (Blancas et al., 2015), including the deterioration of destinations, environmental sustainability is a key ingredient in destination competitiveness (Pulido-Fernández et al., 2019), as well as stimulating continuous touristic activity (Scott et al., 2019). Hence, sustainability is considered a fundamental element of destination development, according to both scholars (Ruhanen, 2019) and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2017).

Most of the negative impacts of tourism can be linked to the inappropriate behavior of tourists, meaning that destination sustainability relies, to a large degree, on how tourists conduct themselves (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014). The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is one approach that can help explain tourists' pro-environmental behavior at the destination (Ulker-Demirel & Ciftci, 2020). However, although the TPB is, indeed, a useful framework for predicting human conduct, the literature recognizes that important new variables need to be incorporated into it and that some of the relationships proposed by this theory need to be modified according to specific contexts (Meng & Cui, 2020).

Among the relevant variables that are candidates for inclusion in this theory, destination image stands out in particular (Soliman, 2021). Destination image is a key variable that captures the market's perception of a destination and is recognized for its ability to promote the characteristics of the destination and influence consumer behavior there (Lam et al., 2020). Furthermore, regarding the specific contexts to which the TPB can be applied, slow tourism may be especially relevant (Han et al., 2019). Slow tourism is a paradigm that has been found to enhance the sustainable development of destinations. It is based on adopting a "slow" philosophy when selecting, making decisions about, and consuming the different components of tourist experiences (Meng & Choi, 2016a and b; Shang et al., 2020). The premises of the TPB, then, enable a "slow destination" image to be linked to the generation of sustainable behavior. In this context, the literature has investigated how tourist destinations' environmental image is related to tourist pro-environmental behavior (Lee & Jeong, 2018; Su & Swanson, 2017) and has highlighted the need to investigate consumer behavior in slow tourism. (Klarin et al., 2022). The present study therefore seeks to respond to this call by studying the possible effect of a "slow destination" image on tourist pro-environmental behavior.

Given the relevance of the "slow destination" image, the medium via which such an image can be formed and the best approach to doing so

need to be identified. Online media offer a particularly powerful approach to developing brand image, since they provide consumers with the chance to participate in continuous interactions and collaborative activities with brands, all of which can help enhance brand image (Foroudi et al., 2019). In this regard, and in line with Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) (Vargo & Lusch, 2016), through these media, consumers participate in the co-creation of the image of the brands with which they interact (Borges-Tiago et al., 2021). In the case of tourist destinations, this co-creation can arise between the tourist and different destination agents, such as local residents, other tourists, local firms, and destination marketing organizations (e.g. Frías-Jamilena et al., 2017) and through different online media such as destination and company websites, social networks, customer review websites, online travel agencies, and so on (Lam et al., 2020). However, the relationship between value co-creation with the different agents at the destination via online media and destination brand image has not yet been empirically demonstrated in the context of a "slow destination" image. This lacuna remains, despite the call for further studies into the influence of value co-creation on brand image in the tourism field (Zhang et al., 2019) and on the mechanisms that may contribute to the development of slow tourism (Manthiou et al., 2022).

Finally, value co-creation may not only have the potential to influence destination brand image but may also play an important role in building sustainable tourism practices (Cannas et al., 2019). Indeed, co-creation has been included in recent studies that apply the TPB framework (Meng & Cui, 2020). Furthermore, the literature holds, theoretically, that value co-creation is a valid strategy for achieving tourist destination sustainability (Font et al., 2021). Hence, in the present work, a novel approach to examining the possible influence of online value co-creation on tourist pro-environmental behavior is proposed, thereby responding to the calls in the literature for further research into the strategies that destinations can implement to foster more environmentally-sustainable tourist behavior (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2022).

Therefore, the present study aims to determine whether a "slow destination" image, combined with value co-creation, may help develop sustainable tourist destinations. To this end, a quantitative empirical study was conducted to identify: (a) the effect of a "slow destination" image on tourist pro-environmental behavior; (b) the effect of online value co-creation on a "slow destination" image; and (c) the effect of online value co-creation on tourist pro-environmental behavior.

2. Literature review

2.1. Tourist pro-environmental behavior and "slow destination" image

Pro-environmental behavior can be defined as the behavior that tourists demonstrate in an attempt to reduce their environmental impact on a trip, thereby contributing to the preservation of the environment of the destination without disturbing its ecosystem or biosphere during their tourism activities (Lee et al., 2013). One of the most commonly used theories to explain tourist pro-environmental behavior is Ajzen's (1985) aforementioned TPB (Cao et al., 2022; Han, 2015; Kim & Ha, 2022; Lee & Lee, 2021; Qin & Hsu, 2022; Sun et al., 2022).

Applying the TPB to the tourism context, the first step toward encouraging tourists to perform pro-environmental behaviors is to ensure that they possess the right *pro-environmental knowledge*—that they correctly process and understand information about how to behave in an environmentally-friendly manner at the destination. This knowledge generates a *pro-environmental attitude*—in other words, a positive predisposition toward behaving pro-environmentally at the destination. Together, this pro-environmental knowledge and attitude will culminate in *pro-environmental behavior*—displaying conduct that is environmentally-friendly for the destination (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2022). Although the TPB is a well-consolidated theory, the literature recommends studying new variables and relationships that may enrich it

(Meng & Cui, 2020). One particular variable in which the TPB literature is showing interest in explaining tourist behavior is destination image (Han, Yu, & Kim, 2018; Park et al., 2017; Soliman, 2021). Authors who have opted to incorporate destination image into the TPB demonstrate its major role in predicting tourist intentions (Soliman, 2021).

According to Baloglu and McCleary (1999), destination image can be defined as "an attitudinal construct consisting of an individual's mental representation of knowledge, feelings, and global impression about [a] destination" (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999, p. 870).

The literature proposes a great variety of measurements for tourist destination image. This is due to the fact that the tourist destination image scales must be adapted to the different tourism specialties (Cooper Villagran, 2017). Therefore, as confirmed by the literature, these scales need to include different dimensions according to the particular type of tourism to which they are applied.

One context to which the evaluation of destination image can be adapted, for example, is that of slow tourism. This type of tourism has been defined as "involving authentic and worthwhile relationships with people, sites, cultures, food, heritage, and environment" (Caffyn, 2012). Generally, slow tourism implies traveling at a slower pace, consciously savoring the sights, sounds, and sensations, and immersing oneself in the local landscape. This is a "local" form of tourism, more individualized and geared to the consumption of authentic indigenous products (as opposed to mass-tourism consumption) (Walker et al., 2021), which fosters sustainable development in the economic, environmental, and social dimensions (Table 1).

Tourist destinations, in general, can benefit from this type of tourism, should they choose to gear toward it, as it is not about attempting to keep the destination stuck in the past but about integrating its local, original, and traditional elements with other—modern—ones so that, together, they help improve the quality of life and sustainability of that destination (Chi & Han, 2020b). Slow tourism also focuses on conveying singular, unique experiences to tourists (Lin et al., 2020; Manthiou et al., 2022). It encourages visitors to enjoy a conscious "slowness" at the destination, a "purer" mind, and a "simpler" life, exploring at their own relaxed pace (Chi & Han, 2020b), in contrast to the accelerated rhythm of everyday routine, and enjoying a travel experience involving indigenous people. For this reason, the literature argues that slow tourism

Table 1
Characteristics of slow tourism and implications for sustainability.

		Key works in the literature
Characteristics of slow tourism	A primarily minority type of tourism that endeavors to avoid the kind of damage to the destination that is generally caused by mass tourism.	Dubois and Ceron (2006); Higham and Cohen (2011); Weaver (2012); Ekinci (2014); Becken (2017).
	Development is supported/managed by *indigenous* agents in harmony with the infrastructure and capacities of the place.	Brunet et al. (2001); Lade and Jackson (2004); Hede (2007); Getz and Andersson (2008); Getz (2009); Hall (2013); Ekinci (2014); Cohen et al. (2016).
Relationship to sustainability	Reduced environmental impact: managers and participants endeavor to reduce any detrimental impact.	Weaver (2012); Hall (2013); Breakey and Breakey (2015); Ekinci (2014); Duignan et al. (2018).
	Local economic driver: indigenous agents and stakeholders of the destination participate.	Nilsson et al. (2011); Ekinci (2014); Presenza et al. (2015).
	Social impact: Tourism activity has a positive impact on the social cohesion of the place.	Kenyon and Black (2001); Hede (2007); Foley (2017); Duignan et al. (2018).

Source: Based on Werner et al. (2020).

benefits the sustainable development of destinations (Walker et al., 2021) because (i) it facilitates more sustainable management of their environment (Werner et al., 2020), (ii) it is associated with a more responsible and sustainable type of travel (Klarin et al., 2022), and (iii) it motivates individuals and society as a whole to carry out more sustainable behaviors (Klarin et al., 2023).

2.1.1. Measuring "slow destination" image

Notwithstanding the marked growth witnessed in slow tourism in recent years, on both the supply and the demand side, the literature is yet to develop scales specifically for measuring "slow destination" image and, consequently, is yet to analyze the effect of such an image on tourist behavior. One previous study in a somewhat similar context—that of
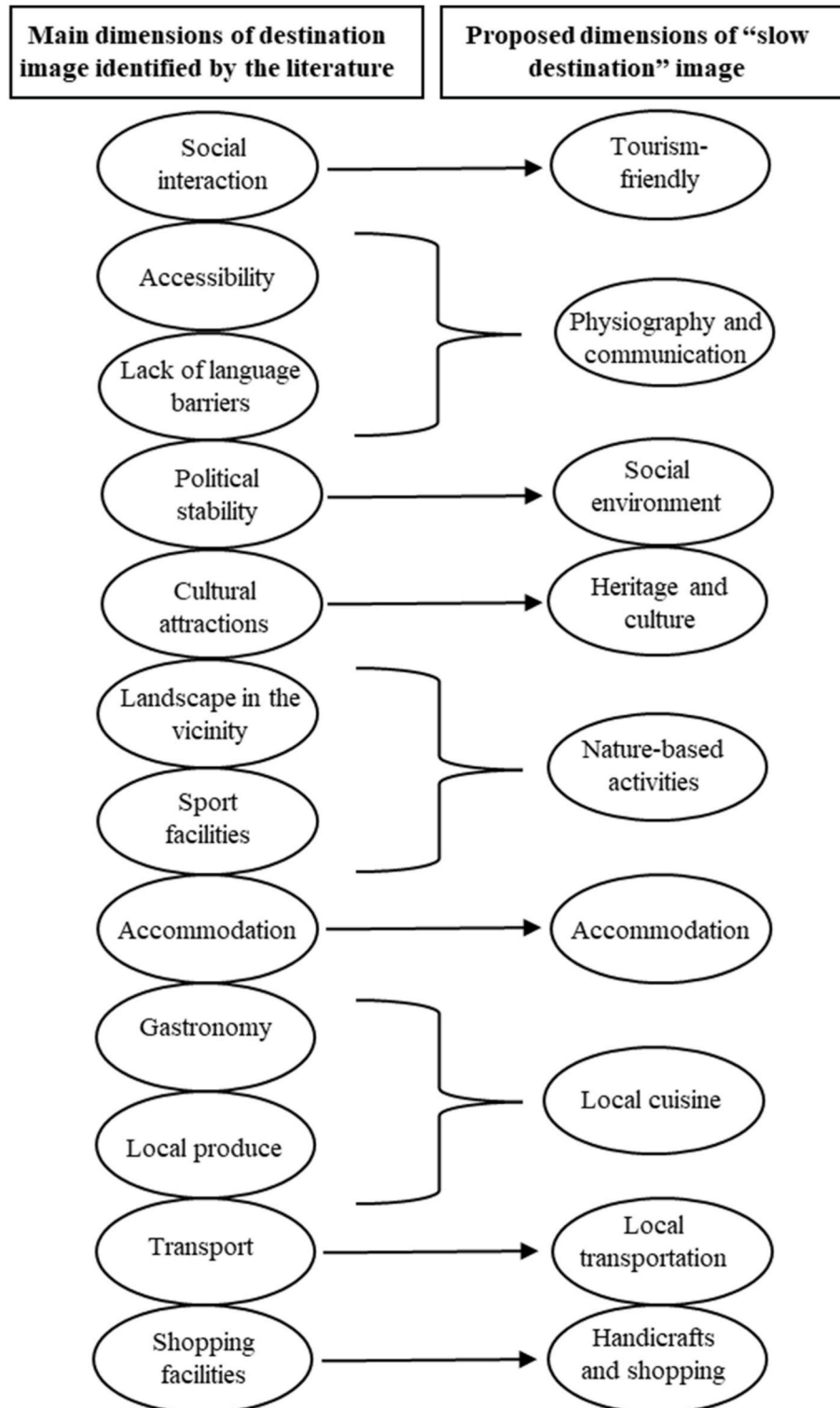

Fig. 1. Proposed dimensions of "slow destination" image.
Source: Based on Beerli & Martín, 2004; Bigné et al., 2009; Chi & Han, 2020a and b; Cooper Villagran, 2017; Gallarza et al., 2002; Polo-Peña et al., 2012; Werner et al., 2020.

green destination image—found that tourists associate features such as landscapes, conservation activities in protected areas, food, and architecture with an environmentally-sustainable destination image (Cooper Villagran, 2017). In relation to rural destinations, Polo-Peña et al. (2012) identified that elements such as the characteristics of the rural tourist destination, the characteristics of the service offer, the cultural offer, the nature-based-activities offer, and the offer of local products and gastronomy should be considered as part of the creation of a rural destination image.

In particular, in the case of the "slow destination" image, this requires that, in addition to the dimensions of tourist destination image, the specific characteristics of destination authenticity, destination slowness, and environmental sustainability of tourist destinations must also be identified and incorporated (Chi & Han, 2020a, 2020b). The works of Chi and Han (2020a, b) make an important contribution in this direction, as they start out from a study of tourists' assessment of the performance of the individual components that make up the slow tourism offer. Identifying and examining these components is essential, as they are fundamental to destinations' development of this type of tourism.

In light of the foregoing findings, each of the dimensions of *destination image* that are most frequently highlighted in the literature dealing with contexts relevant to slow tourism (such as rural destinations, green destinations, or environmentally-sustainable destinations) can be set alongside the attributes deemed to be relevant to slow tourism, as determined by scholars such as Chi and Han (2020a and b) and Werner et al. (2020). On that basis, an equivalence for the dimensions of "slow destination" image can be reached, proposed as follows (Fig. 1).

- social interaction—referring to the hospitality and friendliness of residents toward tourism and tourists (Bigné et al., 2009). In the case of the "slow tourism" image, this would be equivalent to the **"tourism-friendly"** dimension, which alludes to the friendliness of local residents and workers at the destination and their support for non-mass tourism.
- accessibility (Bigné et al., 2009) and a lack of language barriers (Beerli & Martín, 2004)—referring, respectively, to how straightforward it is to get to the destination, and to how easy it is for tourists to manage their visit well regardless of the language they speak. In the case of the "slow tourism" image, these two combined would be equivalent to the **"physiography and communication"** dimension, which refers to the availability of easy-to-understand information at the destination about areas of natural beauty, and easy access to those areas.
- political stability—referring to the existence of a stable and secure political environment (Beerli & Martín, 2004). In the case of the "slow destination" image, this would be equivalent to the "**social environment"** dimension, which refers to a safe and comfortable environment at the destination that enables the tourist to feel at ease.
- cultural attractions—referring to the possibility of visiting monuments, ruins, and other historical attractions, as well as museums, cultural performances, etc. (Polo-Peña et al., 2012). In the case of the "slow destination" image, this would be equivalent to the "**heritage and culture"** dimension, which refers to an offer based on rich historical and cultural heritage and traditions.
- landscape in the vicinity (Beerli & Martín, 2004) and sporting facilities (Bigné et al., 2009)—referring, respectively, to the richness and beauty of the natural landscape, and to how easy it is to undertake sporting activities at the destination. In the case of the "slow destination" image, these two combined would be equivalent to the **"nature-based activities"** dimension, referring to an offer of nature-based activities that are safe to practice and of high quality.
- accommodation—referring to the availability of a range of high-quality accommodation alternatives (Bigné et al., 2009). In the case of the "slow destination" image, this would be equivalent to the **"accommodation"** dimension, which refers to the availability of a

wide variety of options offering unique, locally-managed accommodation solutions, comfort, and quality.
- gastronomy (Beerli & Martín, 2004) and local produce (Polo-Peña et al., 2012)—referring, respectively to the offer of a rich variety of gastronomical delights, and the offer of locally-grown produce. In the case of the "slow destination" image, these two combined would be equivalent to the **"local cuisine"** dimension, which refers to restaurants that use locally-sourced organic and/or ecological ingredients and traditional cooking methods.
- transport—referring to the availability of sufficient local transport options (Bigné et al., 2009). In the case of the "slow destination" image, this would be equivalent to the **"local transportation"** dimension, which refers to means of traveling around the destination that are both efficient and ecologically-friendly.
- shopping facilities—referring to the availability of sufficient shopping facilities (Bigné et al., 2009). In the case of the "slow destination" image, this would be equivalent to the "**handicrafts and shopping"** dimension, which refers to locally-produced, handcrafted products and unique souvenirs with symbolic value, coupled with opportunities to learn all about how local crafts are made.

2.1.2. The influence of "slow destination" image on tourist pro-environmental behavior

With the "slow destination" image dimensions identified, a further important step is to examine the effect of that image on consumer behavior. Some authors have focused on the effects of slow tourism on tourist behavior. Han et al. (2019), study the role of place attachment in slow-destination visit intention. Their results reveal that place attachment has a significant effect on attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, all of which influence behavioral intention, and an indirect effect on behavioral intention. Examining the case of a Slow Food festival, Jung et al. (2015) find that the attributes of such an event—including the food offer, amenities, and entertainment—have direct impacts on visitors' overall experience and satisfaction and that only the quality of food and other amenities contribute directly to revisit intention for the festival. The relationship between the brand association of a slow city and tourist revisit intention is studied in the work of Park and Lee (2019), who show that the positive feelings and brand associations elicited by the destination increase the chances of tourist visits, and therefore could influence the choice of a destination and the chance of revisits in the future. Shang et al. (2020) demonstrate that slow tourism experiences featuring elements of destination authenticity significantly affect tourist attachment to a slow city. Elsewhere, Chi and Han (2020b) analyze the effect of consuming slow tourism experiences on consumer behavior variables, finding that the performance of slow tourism products significantly and positively affects tourists' affection and loyalty toward a slow city, and even their future decision-making process.

Turning to the effect of a "slow destination" *image* on consumer behavior, the underlying premise here, based on the tourism literature, is that destination image plays a significant role in travel behavior (e.g. Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Kim et al., 2021). The image of a destination is generated out of the knowledge that the market acquires about it (e.g. Goodall, 1990; Polo-Peña et al., 2012). In the case of slow destinations, these will generate knowledge among tourists about the authenticity of the destination and its offer, and about how to foster its sustainability on an economic, environmental, and social level (Werner et al., 2020). When tourists are given the opportunity to perceive the sustainability initiatives at the destination, in turn, they will perceive that destination itself as more environmentally-friendly and sustainable (Bilynets et al., 2023).

This is important in the slow tourism context, in light of studies that show how environmental image is related to variables such as loyalty (Lee & Xue, 2020) and tourist pro-environmental behavior (Lee & Jeong, 2018; Su & Swanson, 2017). Su and Swanson (2017) find a positive relationship between tourists' perceptions of environmental

responsibility and their pro-environmental behavior. Similarly, Lee and Jeong (2018) find a positive relationship between the environmental image of a National Park and hikers' pro-environmental behavior. However, these studies focus mostly on nature-based destinations, with only one study (that of Lee & Xue, 2020) investigating the urban environment, and none deals with a destination that offers slow tourism.

Bearing in mind, then, the recognized effects of destination image on consumer behavior, when the image of the destination includes elements linked to its sustainability (as is the case in slow tourism), it is helpful to determine whether that effect is also expressed in tourists' pro-environmental behaviors. Furthermore, research that includes destination image in the TPB framework emphasizes the importance of destination image in promoting tourist pro-environmental behavior (Han, Yu, & Kim, 2018). Therefore, it is proposed here that, if tourist destinations that implement environmental initiatives can influence tourists' pro-environmental perceptions and behaviors, it follows that similar initiatives can influence tourists—in terms of learning about and adopting environmentally-friendly behaviors—based on a destination image that promotes slow tourism. This is based on the following dimensions: tourism-friendly; physiography and communication; social environment; heritage and culture; nature-based activities; accommodation; local cuisine; local transportation; and handicrafts and shopping. However, the relationship between slow destination image and tourist pro-environmental behavior has not been investigated in the extant literature.

On this premise, the following research hypothesis is proposed.

H1. *A "slow destination" image has a positive and significant effect on tourist pro-environmental behavior.*

2.2. Online value co-creation and its influence on "slow destination" image and tourist pro-environmental behavior

According to SDL, firms cannot create value by themselves but, rather, can only offer value propositions and co-create value with consumers. This means that value co-creation is a complex process resulting from interactions between consumers and other agents (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2017). In this sense, value co-creation can be defined as the value that arises out of interactive, joint, collaborative, or personalized activities with the brand (Hollebeek et al., 2019).

To reflect the expansion of online media and, above all, social media, Vargo and Lusch (2016) extend the sixth fundamental premise of SDL from "the customer" to "multiple actors," thereby emphasizing the multi-actor nature of co-creation in such interactive environments (Zadeh et al., 2023). Therefore, in the tourism field and in the online context, co-creation derives from the interactions that take place between tourists and destination agents through different types of online media, including websites, social networks, customer review websites, online travel agencies, and such like (Lam et al., 2020). The notion of *agent* is broad and extends from destination residents, other tourists, and small local traders or craftspeople to large professional firms or destination marketing organizations (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2017).

Through online media, tourists can participate in co-creating the image of tourism-related brands (Borges-Tiago et al., 2021). This is because, when co-creation happens, tourists are effectively participating in an experience that fosters their commitment to the brand and enhances the image that they hold of that brand (Bouchriha et al., 2023). This has been demonstrated in studies such as that of Lam et al. (2020), which demonstrates the influence of the co-creation of online experiences via user-generated content platforms on destination image, or other studies, such as those of Borges-Tiago et al. (2021), Glyptou (2021), Revilla Hernández et al. (2016), and Wang et al. (2020). These authors analyze the role played by social media in the co-creation of destination image. Their findings lead to the conclusion that SDL is an appropriate theoretical framework with which to link value co-creation with consumer response via destination image (Glyptou, 2021). That

said, these studies focus mainly on the interactions between the tourists themselves, omitting the rest of the agents at the destination, and deal with contexts other than slow tourism.

Meanwhile, other scholars highlight the need for destinations to interact with tourists in order to create the desired image of a slow destination (Özdemir & Çelebi, 2018; Park & Lee, 2019). They also point to the role that online media—primarily, social media such as Instagram (Le Busque et al., 2022) and YouTube (Losada and Mota, 2019; Manthiou et al., 2022)—may play in forming a "slow destination" image. In short, it is vital that tourist destinations are aware of how the perception of slow tourism is generated by tourists interacting with each other and with agents at the destination through online media (Le Busque et al., 2022). Hence, it is useful to better understand how value co-creation via online media can contribute to the formation of a "slow destination" image.

Against this backdrop, several authors have called for further research into the topic of value co-creation in context, such as: Zhang et al. (2019), who propose an analysis of the influence of value co-creation on brand image; Le Busque et al. (2022), who propose future research into tourist perceptions of slow tourism; and Manthiou et al. (2022), who call for further study of the drivers of slow tourism. Hence, given that value co-creation consists of an interaction that enables the customer's needs to be satisfied, this process is expected to impact their perceived brand image (Bouchriha et al., 2023). Therefore, it is proposed here that value co-creation, through interactions between tourists and different agents from the destination via online media, will enable those tourists to personalize an authentic experience that will influence their perceived "slow destination" image. Thus, the following research hypothesis is proposed.

H2. *Online value co-creation between tourists and destination agents has a positive and significant effect on "slow destination" image.*

The literature has made significant inroads into investigating the antecedents of pro-environmental behavior in tourism (e.g. AlSuwaidi et al., 2021; Frías-Jamilena et al., 2022) and theoretically holds that value co-creation is a valid strategy for achieving tourist destination sustainability (Font et al., 2021). This is because value co-creation processes are critical to the building of sustainable tourism practices (Cannas et al., 2019). Furthermore, value co-creation is among the new variables identified by the literature as needing to be included in the TPB, in different areas including tourism (Ahn et al., 2020; Meng & Cui, 2020; Shoukat & Ramkissoon, 2022). The inclusion of this variable in the TPB is due to the fact that, according to this theory, when the consumer has a positive attitude toward the value co-creation process, their behavioral intention increases (Shoukat & Ramkissoon, 2022).

However, the literature has yet to investigate *empirically* the possible influence of *online* value co-creation on tourist pro-environmental behavior. Several studies propose this possible relationship *theoretically*, supporting the idea that co-creation can encourage tourists to carry out ecological practices (Bordian et al., 2021) and that online media help tourists to co-create responsible tourism experiences (Shen et al., 2020). Furthermore, the TPB literature theoretically argues that, the more individuals engage in co-creation behaviors at the destination, the better their attitude toward that destination will be, which will translate into more favorable behavior toward it (Meng & Cui, 2020). Building on this understanding, other authors propose future lines of research dealing with these relationships, such as Uşaklı et al. (2019), who call for further studies on the interactions between tourists and the destination via online media, and Frías-Jamilena et al. (2022) and Mondal and Samaddar (2021), who recommend more in-depth examination of which marketing strategies can influence pro-environmental behavior among tourists. On this basis, it is proposed here that value co-creation between the tourist and the destination, through interactions with different agents from the destination via online media, will enable tourists to design sustainable and environmentally-friendly tourism experiences that are respectful of the local community, which

will have a positive effect on their pro-environmental attitudes, knowledge, and behavior.

The following research hypothesis is therefore proposed.

H3. *Online value co-creation between tourists and destination agents has a positive and significant effect on tourist pro-environmental behavior.*

Fig. 2 shows the proposed research model.

3. Methodology

3.1. Population and sample

The study's sample comprised Spanish tourists who had undertaken domestic tourism during the previous six months. This particular population was selected on the basis that the tourism sector is a major driver of the Spanish economy. However, the popularity of Spanish tourist destinations comes at a price: the touristic areas that are most heavily exploited suffer from tourism-related problems, including urban development pressure and consumption of natural resources. Therefore, the sector must identify strategies for achieving destinations' sustainable development (Fernández-Fernández, 2020) that can generate wealth while promoting sustainability, keeping pace with the diversification of tourism products, and responding innovatively to ever-evolving tourist demand (Reier Forradellas, 2021).

To select the research participants, an Internet user panel managed by Dynata Global Spain was used. This company was selected on the basis of its track record in market research, having won several quality awards, and for the extent of its experience (it conducts more than 100 million surveys per year). Moreover, by controlling the characteristics of individuals within the sample, the online sample blend offered by the company is consistent vis-à-vis external benchmarks, including telephone sample studies. Hence, the target population for this study was selected with a high degree of accuracy, ensuring sample representativeness (Dynata, 2023; Rodríguez-Molina et al., 2019). Data-collection was conducted during March 2022, producing a final sample of 681 tourists.

Regarding the sample characteristics (Table 2), the sample was balanced in terms of sex, and predominantly comprised respondents in the age range of 35–44 (30.8% of the sample), who were university-educated (48.8%), employed or self-employed (71.1%), and had an income greater than €1201 per month (84.6%). These characteristics are very similar to those found in other studies conducted in the Spanish tourism context (e.g. Martínez-García, 2018; Šerić & Gil-Saura, 2019) and to the profile of the domestic traveler as described by the Spanish national *Residents Travel Survey* (INE, 2023).

Table 2
Sample characteristics.

Consumer characteristics	N° of consumers	% of the sample (n = 310)
Gender		
Female	340	49.9%
Male	339	49.8%
Other	2	0.3%
Age		
18–24	34	5%
25–34	97	14.2%
35–44	210	30.8%
45–54	184	27%
55–64	121	17.8%
65 and above	35	5.1%
Educational level		
Primary education	8	1.1%
Compulsory secondary education	61	9%
Post-compulsory secondary education	114	16.7%
Vocational training	166	24.4%
University	332	48.8%
Employment status		
Employed or self-employed	484	71.1%
Student	30	4.4%
Unemployed	69	10.1%
Retired or in pre-retirement	55	8.1%
Homemaker	35	8.1%
O		
Other	8	1.2%
Monthly household income		
Up to €600	11	1.6%
€600–€1200	94	13.8%
€1201–€1800	149	21.9%
€1801–€2400	147	21.6%
€2401–€3000	151	22.2%
€3000 or above	129	18.9%

3.2. Measurement scales

The following constructs were covered in the survey questionnaire: online value co-creation, "slow destination" image, and pro-environmental behavior. All of the scales used in the present study derive from studies conducted in the tourism field. Seven-point Likert scales were used to measure all the constructs (Appendix A), with the scales having been adapted as necessary from other relevant studies. The respondents had to respond to the questionnaire on the basis of the last destination that they had visited in the previous six months.

To measure online value co-creation, a scale adapted from the work of Frías-Jamilena et al. (2017) was employed. Respondents were asked about the co-creation that took place as a result of their interactions via online media with other tourists, with the local population, and with
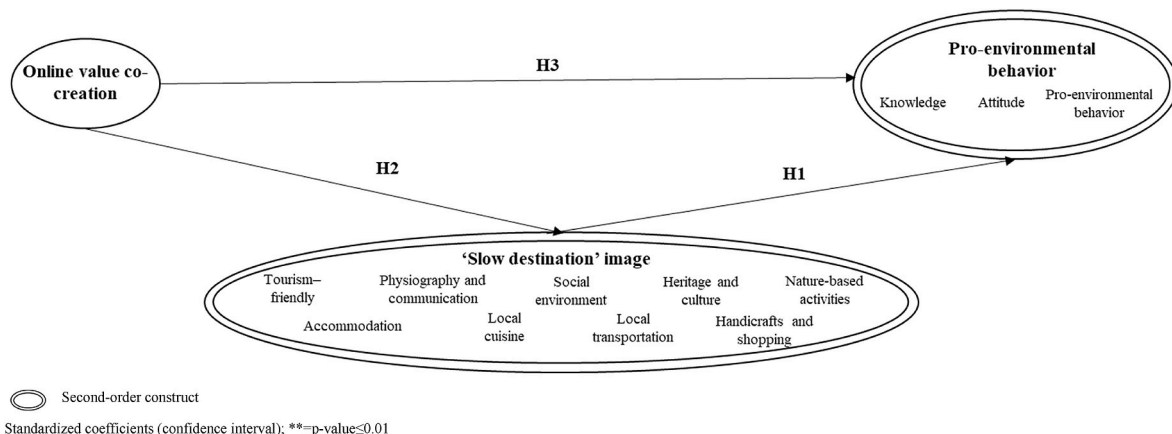

Fig. 2. Proposed research model.

other destination agents. To measure pro-environmental behavior, the scale developed by Ballantyne et al. (2011) was adapted. This second scale distinguished between three components or dimensions of pro-environmental behavior: pro-environmental attitude, pro-environmental knowledge, and pro-environmental behavior itself. In both cases, the original scales were developed and validated in the tourism field.

Regarding the measurement of "slow destination" image, there are no previous studies providing a specific scale. Hence, given the novel nature of the approach proposed here, a scale originally designed to measure destination image was adapted to the slow tourism context. The starting point was the components of image scales considered most similar or pertinent to slow tourism, such as those relating to rural, green, or environmentally-sustainable destinations (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Bigné et al., 2009; Cooper Villagran, 2017; Gallarza et al., 2002; Polo-Peña et al., 2012), and combined these with other components drawn from a review of specialist slow tourism literature (Chi & Han, 2020a and b; Werner et al., 2020) (Fig. 1).

This adaptation produced a scale comprising the following items and dimensions: 5 items, relating to "tourism-friendly" (referring to the local community's and service providers' friendliness toward tourism; FRIEND1 to FRIEND5); 4 items relating to "Physiography and communication" (referring to the accessibility of natural areas at the destination and availability of useful information for visitors; PHYSCO1 to PHYSCO3); 3 items relating to the "Social environment" (referring to calm, safe, and tranquil atmosphere at the destination; SOCENV1 to SOCENV3); 3 items relating to "Heritage and culture" (referring to the destination's historical and cultural heritage, architectural style, and traditional performances; HERCUL1 to HERCUL3); 3 items relating to "Nature-based activities" (referring to the availability of resource and activities based in nature; NAT1 to NAT3); 4 items relating to "Accommodation" (referring to the destination's offer of unique accommodation options that are managed locally by people living in the destination; ACCOM1 to ACCOM4); 5 items relating to "Local cuisine" (referring to the destination's gastronomical offer, such as indigenous, ecological, and traditional ingredients, dishes, recipes, and restaurants; CUIS1 to CUIS5); 3 items relating to "Local transportation" (referring to the availability of ecological, environmentally-friendly modes of transport; TRANS1 to TRANS3); and, finally, 3 items relating to "Handicrafts and shopping" (referring to the availability for purchase of typical handcrafted products and activities for visitors related to how these are made; HANDSHOP1 to HANDSHOP5).

4. Results

4.1. Model fit and evaluation of the measurement model

Fig. 2 shows the proposed research model, which captures the variables—"online value", "co-creation", "slow destination image", and "pro-environmental behavior"—and the relationships between them. The online value co-creation variable is represented as a first-order construct, while slow destination image and pro-environmental behavior are represented as second-order constructs.

To test for common method bias, Harman's Single-Factor Test was applied, which is the most widely-used method for doing so (Tehseen et al., 2017). It requires all items for every construct to be loaded into a factor analysis. The presence of substantial bias is evident if the analysis produces eigenvalues suggesting that the first factor accounts for more than 50% of the variance among variables (Fuller et al., 2016). In this case, the analysis showed that the first factor captured only 42.96% of the variance in data, indicating the absence of common method bias.

To test the adequacy of the model and the measurement scales, and to test the proposed hypotheses, a covariance-based structural equation modeling (CBSEM) analysis was performed, using AMOS V.26 software. This analytical methodology was chosen because CBSEM minimizes measurement bias, since it enables measurement errors to be

represented (Zou et al., 2018). Thus, CBSEM provides significant protection against measurement error, offering unbiased parameter estimates (Gefen et al., 2011).

First, as the multivariate normality test of the variables proved significant, the research model was estimated using the maximum likelihood model combined with bootstrapping (Yuan & Hayashi, 2003). With regard to the model's goodness-of-fit, both overall fit (RMSEA = 0.06; Normed Chi-Square = 3.84) and incremental fit indicators (CFI: 0.90; IFI: 0.90; NFI: 0.86) presented adequate values, according to the literature (Hair et al., 2018).

Next, the measurement model was evaluated (Table 3). The values for the standardized loads between each latent variable and its indicators were tested, to ensure they were significant and higher than, or close to, 0.70, as recommended by the literature (Hair et al., 2018). The individual reliability or R^2 of each item and dimension was then checked, all the values being greater than, or very close to, 0.50—again, as recommended by the literature (Hair et al., 2018).

Regarding the internal consistency of the scales, both the composite reliability and the variance extracted were tested to ensure that they presented adequate values relative to the thresholds proposed in the literature (0.70 and 0.50, respectively) (Hair et al., 2018). Finally, the existence of discriminant validity between the variables and the dimensions in the research model was validated, as the correlations between variables were not greater than or close to 0.80 (Bagozzi, 1994) and the confidence interval of the correlations did not include the value "1" (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988).

These results show that the scales used to measure the variables of online value co-creation, "slow destination" image, and tourist pro-environmental behavior are adequate. In this sense, they demonstrate that tourist pro-environmental behavior comprises the dimensions of knowledge, attitude, and behavior. They also confirm that "slow destination" image comprises the proposed dimensions. These are: (i) tourism-friendly; (ii) physiography and communication; (iii) social environment,; (iv) heritage and culture; (v) nature-based activities; (vi) accommodation; (vii) local cuisine; (viii) local transportation; and (ix) handicrafts and shopping (see Table 3).

4.2. Hypothesis-testing

Next, the proposed hypotheses were tested (Fig. 3), as follows:

H1 proposes that a "slow destination" image exerts a positive effect on tourist pro-environmental behavior. This hypothesis receives empirical support, as the relationship between the two variables is significant (p-value <0.01), with a standardized coefficient of 0.48 and a confidence interval of 0.39–0.56.

H2 posits that online value co-creation between tourists and destination agents has a positive effect on "slow destination" image. This hypothesis, too, finds empirical support, with the relationship between these variables being statistically significant (p-value <0.01), presenting a standardized coefficient of 0.56 and a confidence interval of 0.50–0.62.

H3 holds that online value co-creation between tourists and destination agents exerts a positive effect on tourist pro-environmental behavior. Again, the hypothesis finds empirical support. The relationship between these variables is significant (p-value <0.01), with a standardized coefficient of 0.31 and a confidence interval of 0.22–0.41.

5. Discussion of the results, conclusions, and implications

5.1. Discussion of the results

The present study applied a "slow destination" image to test its effectiveness in developing greater pro-environmental knowledge, attitudes, and behavior among tourists. This is thanks to the fact that the image of the destination is generated out of the knowledge that the market holds about it (e.g. Goodall, 1990; Polo-Peña et al., 2012),

Table 3

Indicators of convergent validity and internal consistency of the scales.

FIRST-ORDER DIMENSIONS		
Factor	Standardized loads, confidence interval, and p-value	Individual reliability (R²), confidence interval, and p-value
ONLINE VALUE CO-CREATION	CR = 0.94; AVE = 0.80	
OVC1	0.79 (0.75; 0.84) **	0.64 (0.57; 0.71)**
OVC2	0.80 (0.75; 0.84) **	0.64 (0.57; 0.71) **
OVC3	0.79 (0.75; 0.84) **	0.64 (0.57; 0.70) **
OVC4	0.89 (0.86; 0.91) **	0.78 (0.73; 0.83) **
"SLOW DESTINATION" IMAGE		
Tourism-friendly	**CR=0.91; AVE=0.68**	
FRIEND1	0.88 (0.85; 0.91) **	0.77 (0.72; 0.83) **
FRIEND2	0.89 (0.86; 0.92) **	0.79 (0.73; 0.84) **
FRIEND3	0.54 (0.48; 0.60) **	0.30 (0.23; 0.36) **
FRIEND4	0.78 (0.72; 0.83) **	0.61 (0.52; 0.69) **
FRIEND5	0.77 (0.71; 0.82) **	0.60 (0.51; 0.68) **
Physiography and communication	**CR=0.90; AVE=0.75**	
PHYSCO1	0.85 (0.80; 0.89) **	0.72 (0.64; 0.79) **
PHYSCO2	0.88 (0.85; 0.91) **	0.78 (0.72; 0.82) **
PHYSCO3	0.81 (0.77; 0.84) **	0.65 (0.59; 0.71) **
Social environment	**CR=0.94; AVE=0.84**	
SOCENV1	0.85 (0.82; 0.88) **	0.73 (0.68; 0.78) **
SOCENV2	0.87 (0.82; 0.91) **	0.76 (0.67; 0.83) **
SOCENV3	0.89 (0.86; 0.91) **	0.80 (0.75; 0.84) **
Heritage and culture	**CR=0.91; AVE=0.77**	
HERCUL1	0.79 (0.74; 0.83) **	0.62 (0.55; 0.70) **
HERCUL2	0.71 (0.64; 0.76) **	0.50 (0.41; 0.58) **
HERCUL3	0.81 (0.75; 0.85) **	0.65 (0.56; 0.73) **
Nature-based activities	**CR=0.93; AVE=0.82**	
NAT1	0.92 (0.90; 0.94) **	0.84 (0.81; 0.88) **
NAT2	0.95 (0.93; 0.99) **	0.89 (0.86; 0.92) **
NAT3	0.91 (0.88; 0.93) **	0.82 (0.78; 0.86) **
Accommodation	**CR=0.93; AVE=0.76**	
ACCOM1	0.69 (0.64; 0.74) **	0.48 (0.41; 0.54) **
ACCOM2	0.70 (0.65 0.75) **	0.49 (0.42; 0.56) **
ACCOM3	0.85 (0.82; 0.88) **	0.73 (0.67; 0.78) **
ACCOM4	0.82 (0.78; 0.86) **	0.67 (0.61; 0.73) **
Local cuisine	**CR=0.93; AVE=0.73**	
CUIS1	0.81 (0.78; 0.84) **	0.66 (0.60; 0.71) **
CUIS2	0.66 (0.59; 0.71) **	0.43 (0.35; 0.50) **
CUIS3	0.82 (0.79; 0.85) **	0.68 (0.62; 0.73) **
CUIS4	0.82 (0.79; 0.85) **	0.67 (0.62; 0.73) **
CUIS5	0.82 (0.78; 0.85) **	0.67 (0.61; 0.73) **
Local transportation	**CR=0.88; AVE=0.72**	
TRANS1	0.86 (0.82; 0.89) **	0.73 (0.67; 0.79) **
TRANS2	0.74 (0.69; 0.78) **	0.55 (0.47; 0.61) **
TRANS3	0.81 (0.77; 0.84) **	0.65 (0.59; 0.72) **
Handicrafts & shopping	**CR=0.74; AVE=0.49**	
HANDSHOP1	0.79 (0.74; 0.83) **	0.62 (0.56; 0.69) **
HANDSHOP2	0.59 (0.53; 0.64) **	0.35 (0.28; 0.41) **
HANDSHOP3	0.71 (0.66; 0.76) **	0.51 (0.44; 0.58) **
PRO-ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOR		
Attitude	**CR=0.95; AVE=0.79**	
ATT1	0.85 (0.82; 0.87) **	0.72 (0.67; 0.76) **
ATT2	0.90 (0.87; 0.92) **	0.80 (0.77; 0.84) **
ATT3	0.89 (0.87; 0.91) **	0.80 (0.76; 0.84) **
ATT4	0.91 (0.89; 0.93) **	0.83 (0.79; 0.86) **
ATT5	0.89 (0.87; 0.91) **	0.80 (0.76; 0.83) **
Knowledge	**CR=0.93; AVE=0.74**	
KNOW1	0.87 (0.84; 0.90) **	0.76 (0.70; 0.81) **
KNOW2	0.89 (0.87; 0.92) **	0.80 (0.75; 0.84) **
KNOW3	0.87 (0.83; 0.89) **	0.75 (0.70; 0.80) **
KNOW4	0.86 (0.83; 0.89) **	0.74 (0.69; 0.79) **
KNOW5	0.80 (0.76; 0.83) **	0.64 (0.58; 0.70) **
Behavior	**CR=0.94; AVE=0.84**	
BEHAV1	0.92 (0.90; 0.94) **	0.85 (0.81; 0.89) **
BEHAV2	0.94 (0.92; 0.96) **	0.88 (0.84; 0.91) **
BEHAV3	0.88 (0.85; 0.81) **	0.78 (0.73; 0.82) **
SECOND-ORDER DIMENSIONS		
"SLOW DESTINATION" IMAGE	**CR=0.97; AVE=0.80**	
Tourism-friendly	0.84 (0.80; 0.88) **	0.71 (0.64; 0.77) **

Table 3 (*continued*)

FIRST-ORDER DIMENSIONS		
Factor	Standardized loads, confidence interval, and p-value	Individual reliability (R²), confidence interval, and p-value
Physiography and communication	0.80 (0.75; 0.85) **	0.64 (0.56; 0.72) **
Social environment	0.82 (0.77; 0.96) **	0.67 (0.60; 0.74) **
Heritage and culture	0.74 (0.68; 0.80) **	0.55 (0.46; 0.63) **
Nature-based activities	0.71 (0.66; 0.75) **	0.50 (0.43; 0.56) **
Accommodation	0.91 (0.88; 0.94) **	0.83 (0.78; 0.88) **
Local cuisine	0.89 (0.86; 0.92) **	0.80 (0.75; 0.84) **
Local transportation	0.71 (0.65; 0.76) **	0.50 (0.42; 0.57) **
Handicrafts and shopping	0.89 (0.85; 0.93) **	0.79 (0.72; 0.86) **
PRO-ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOR	**CR=0.94; AVE=0.85**	
Attitude	0.96 (0.94; 0.97) **	0.92 (0.88; 0.95) **
Knowledge	0.99 (0.97; 1.00) **	0.97 (0.94; 1.00) **
Pro-environmental behavior	0.92 (0.89; 0.94) **	0.84 (0.79; 0.88) **

CF=Composite reliability; VE=Variance extracted; **=p-value≤0.01

which, in the case of slow destinations, is based on an offer that promotes the sustainability of the destination on an economic, environmental, and social level (Werner et al., 2020). When tourists are exposed to sustainable initiatives at the destination, they perceive it to be more sustainable (Bilynets et al., 2023), and this will raise their awareness of what is possible, thereby encouraging them to achieve greater pro-environmental knowledge, attitudes, and behavior, applied to that destination. Furthermore, it is demonstrated here that the way to achieve this "slow destination" image is by encouraging *online* value co-creation between tourists and destination agents, since online media facilitate the formation of such an image (Bouchriha et al., 2023; Le Busque et al., 2022), while co-creation with the tourist will contribute to stronger perceptions of this image and greater commitment to the destination. This co-creation will also contribute to more sustainable behaviors among tourists, given that value co-creation between tourists and a destination's agents encourages more environmentally-friendly behavior at that destination (Meng & Cui, 2020).

5.2. Conclusions

The primary objective of tourism managers is to maximize the competitiveness of their destinations, in which sustainability is a key factor (Pulido-Fernández et al., 2019), especially for long-term tourism development (Scott et al., 2019). Destinations must therefore position sustainability at the center of their strategic outlook (Gösslin et al., 2020).

On this point, the literature calls for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms and strategies that can contribute to improving destination sustainability, in general, and in the context of tourists' adoption of pro-environmental behaviors, more specifically (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2022). This study proposes that slow tourism is a type of tourism that can be offered by destinations of any kind, with the aim of fostering destination sustainability. Slow tourism is a travel trend, and both tourism academics and practitioners are interested in understanding it more deeply (Oh et al., 2016). The present study contributes to this interest by showing how destinations can gear their offer toward slow tourism and thereby contribute to sustainable behavior among tourists. Further, it demonstrates the role of online value co-creation in forming a "slow destination" image and encouraging tourist pro-environmental behavior.

5.3. Theoretical implications

Based on the empirical study conducted here among Spanish domestic tourists, a number of theoretical implications can be derived. The
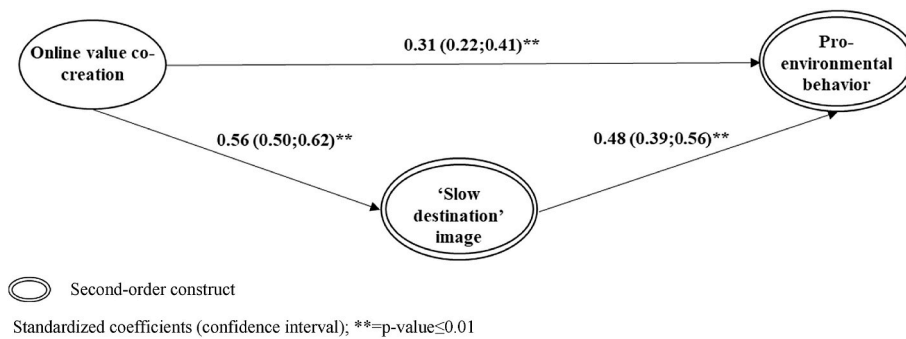
Fig. 3. Results of hypothesis-testing.

findings show that promoting a "slow destination" image will contribute to greater adoption of pro-environmental behaviors among tourists by generating increased pro-environmental knowledge, attitudes, and behavior, thereby contributing to the sustainability of that destination. This finding makes a dual contribution to the literature. On the one hand, it is consistent with the TPB, a framework within which recent research has demonstrated the role that destination image can play in tourist behavior and, more specifically, in tourist pro-environmental behavior (Han, Yu, & Kim, 2018). It is also in line with the extant literature that identifies that destination image has an effect on consumer behavior and, more specifically, that the environmental image of the destination will influence key variables of consumer behavior such as loyalty (Lee & Xue, 2020), as well as pro-environmental behavior (Lee & Jeong, 2018; Su & Swanson, 2017). However, the present research constitutes an advance in the literature as it provides a new context in which to evaluate destination image—slow tourism—and thus also responds to the future lines of research proposed by other scholars regarding the evaluation of tourists' perceptions of this mode of tourism (Le Busque et al., 2022). It is therefore the first study to demonstrate the relationship between a "slow destination" image and tourist pro-environmental behaviors.

On the other hand, the present work adapts a measurement scale that captures a "slow destination" image, responding to the previously-identified need for greater knowledge of the mechanisms that may facilitate the development of a destination from the market- and supply-side perspectives (e.g. Manthiou et al., 2022). Based on a review of the specialist literature dealing with destination image, including the most current contributions relevant to the topic of slow tourism (e.g. Chi & Han, 2020a, b; Manthiou et al., 2022), the adapted scale presented here offers a comprehensive vision of the elements that, together, form destination image while also conveying the characteristics of authenticity, slowness, and sustainability (e.g. Chi & Han, 2020a, b). The scale comprises the following dimensions: tourism-friendly (residents' and service providers' warmth and friendliness toward tourists); physiography and communication (ready access to the natural spaces offered by the destination); social environment (an environment that is safe and pleasant for tourists); heritage and culture (a historical–cultural offer, combined with cultural activities); nature-based activities (the availability of high-quality activities related to nature); accommodation (unique tourist accommodation that is typical of the location); local cuisine (healthy cuisine based on traditional dishes and produce sourced from the local area); local transportation (sustainable local transport); and handicrafts and shopping (the possibility of having direct contact with the making of handicrafts linked to the place, and being able to purchase them). These dimensions are consonant with the previous literature dealing with brand image in contexts pertinent to slow tourism (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Bigné et al., 2009; Polo-Peña et al., 2012).

The results of this study also show that online value co-creation will contribute to forming a "slow destination" image. These results are compatible with SDL, which recognizes the multi-actor nature of co-creation in online media (Zadeh et al., 2023). Furthermore, they are in line with previous studies that demonstrate the invaluable role that online media can play in forming a "slow destination" image (Losada and Mota, 2019; Le Busque et al., 2022; Manthiou et al., 2022). The results also align with those of authors such as Özdemir and Çelebi (2018) and Park and Lee (2019), who underline how important it is for destinations to interact with tourists if they are to achieve the "slow" image they are seeking to build. The results are also consonant with the findings of studies in contexts beyond slow tourism, which have analyzed the role played by online media in co-creating destination image and have demonstrated empirically the influence of online co-creation on destination image (Lam et al., 2020). However, these studies are almost always undertaken from the point of view of interactions between tourists (e.g. Borges-Tiago et al., 2021) and not from the perspective of the interactions between tourists and other agents of the destination, which is the very focus of the present research. The study constitutes a valuable advance in the literature, given that no previous studies have linked online value co-creation to "slow destination" image, and it responds to the calls from other authors to achieve a deeper understanding of the influence of co-creation on destination brand image (Zhan et al., 2019) and on the drivers of slow tourism (Manthiou et al., 2022).

Finally, the present study demonstrates the influence of online value co-creation on tourist pro-environmental behavior. The findings are consistent with the premises of the TPB, which indicate that a positive *attitude* toward value co-creation should foster tourist *behavioral intention* toward a destination (Shoukat & Ramkissoon, 2022). The results are also consistent with the literature that shows theoretical evidence of the role that co-creation can play in influencing tourists' ecological practices and in the co-creation of responsible tourism experiences (Bordian et al., 2021; Shen et al., 2020). It also shows the role of online media in encouraging tourists to behave in an environmentally-sustainable way (Han, McCabe, et al., 2018). This study goes a step further by empirically demonstrating that online value co-creation can help the sustainability of destinations based on more environmentally-responsible behavior among tourists. In doing so, the study responds to the future lines of research proposed by other authors, who point to the need to understand more about the marketing strategies that destinations can implement to achieve this type of desirable tourist behavior (Mondal & Samaddar, 2021; Frías-Jamilena et al., 2022). In this sense, this study confirms that pro-environmental behavior is formed by the dimensions of *knowledge* (correct processing of information to understand how to behave in an environmentally-responsible manner at the destination), *attitude* (positive predisposition toward behaving pro-environmentally at the destination), and *behavior* (displaying environmentally-friendly conduct at the destination) (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2022).

5.4. Practical implications

While the empirical aspect of the present study centers on Spanish domestic tourists, the results have several practical implications not only

for tourism entities and agents operating in Spain but also for any entity (be it public or private) that is looking to improve destination sustainability. This is important because improving destination sustainability has become an urgent objective on a worldwide scale (e.g. European Union, 2021; UNWTO, 2020), not only in terms of the need to conserve the natural environment but also to enable destinations to retain their appeal and their capacity to attract tourists over the medium-to-long term.

Tourist behavior is known to be a fundamental pillar of destination sustainability (Pulido-Fernández et al., 2019). Hence, it is important to pinpoint those interventions that can encourage and sustain positive behavioral change among tourists—and, in particular, their pro-environmental conduct at the destination. Those responsible for operations in the sector (destination marketing organizations and managers of private tourism service-providers, for instance) must therefore have access to effective strategies for promoting this kind of behavior among tourists. The results of the present study demonstrate that one such highly effective strategy is for destinations to create and promote a "slow" image by leveraging the potential of online media to co-create value with tourists (current and potential), as a means of increasing their pro-environmental knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. This approach can ultimately translate into improved destination environmental conservation.

On the premise that slow tourism is one of the fastest-growing niche markets and can be viewed as a form of sustainability tourism (Le Busque et al., 2022), the results of this study have shown that a "slow" image will influence the sustainability of the destination through tourists achieving greater pro-environmental knowledge. In other words, this image will (i) help tourists to correctly process the information they receive about how to behave in an environmentally-friendly way at the destination; (ii) positively influence attitudes, such that tourists will have a positive predisposition toward pro-environmental practices at the destination; and (iii) contribute to shaping tourist behavior, such that individuals will seek to minimize their environmental impact and thus contribute to the preservation of the destination.

These findings can be of help to professionals in the sector—for example, those responsible for destination management, who will be better placed to gear the image of the destination toward enhancing tourists' pro-environmental orientation toward the destination. Hence, those destinations seeking to encourage tourists to behave in more environmentally-sustainable ways need to form a "slow destination" image. To achieve this, they should work toward conditions in which: the indigenous residents and service providers warmly welcome tourism (tourism-friendly); there is easy-to-understand information and easy access for anyone wishing to visit the natural resources (physiography and communication); the environment is not overcrowded and it is safe, relaxing, and comfortable for tourists (social environment); culture heritage and traditions are made visible (heritage and culture); there is a wide offer of activities based on being in direct contact with nature, geared toward learning about the natural environment (nature-based activities); there are varied accommodation options that are unique, comfortable, and managed by local people (accommodation); there are varied gastronomic options, but all offering local produce and ecological ingredients that are prepared and cooked using traditional methods (local cuisine); efficient, environmentally-friendly transport methods are made available (local transportation); and there is a diverse offer of handicrafts available to purchase that are unique to the place and reflect the singularity of the destination (handicrafts and shopping).

Among the places that are successfully applying and disseminating the aforementioned characteristics, or actively working toward this, are both rural and urban destinations in Spain. For instance, the village of Bubión (in the Province of Granada) positions itself explicitly, via its website (https://www.bubion.es) and its social networks, as a slow destination, within a tourism model that is respectful of the natural environment. It has successfully built an image of a destination in which tourists are encouraged to immerse themselves in traditions and slow-

paced ways of life. Among urban locations, one city that has long been known for its overcrowding but is taking steps toward developing the characteristics of a slow destination—especially by promoting its local gastronomy—is the city of Barcelona. Thus, on its destination website, it has a section devoted to traditional local gastronomy—specifically, Catalan cuisine (https://www.barcelonaturisme.com/wv3/en/page/148/catalan-cuisine.html). Furthermore, at the country-destination level, Turespaña, the body charged with managing Spain's tourism brand, is also promoting, via online media, the option of conducting slow tourism there (https://www.spain.info/en/top/spain-slow-tourism-travelling-no-rush).

The results of this study will also guide destinations on the importance of using online media—in particular, social networks or specific tourism sites—as a means of interacting with tourists. Through this interaction, destinations can encourage tourists to personalize their own environmentally-sustainable trips and design an authentic indigenous experience that is both enjoyable *and* respectful of the local community and the environment. The use of online media also enables tourists to share their pro-environmental experiences and actions with others, which helps promote awareness of how to support the sustainability of the destination. This can be achieved by using the online tools available to engage in dialogue with tourists about the role they can play in contributing to destination sustainability, including the importance of showing respect for indigenous residents and the local culture. Through online media, destinations can provide guidance on this issue and answer any questions tourists and potential visitors may have about different aspects of sustainability. These efforts will not only help the tourist to perceive a stronger "slow destination" image but also to acquire greater knowledge about what they might do to support the sustainability of the destination (pro-environmental knowledge), which, in turn, will generate a favorable attitude in them toward demonstrating the right behaviors (pro-environmental attitude). And, ultimately, tourists who behave more responsibly toward the environment (pro-environmental behavior) will contribute to the long-term thriving of the destination. The tourism body of the Spanish region of Andalusia is a good example of the aforementioned practices, since, through its website, it provides all the information necessary for tourists to behave sustainably at the destination (https://www.andalucia.org/en/sustainable-tourism/tips-for-and-eco-tourist).

In short, the contribution of these results to the tourism industry is highly relevant because, in these times of tourist overexploitation, when sustainability must be a fundamental pillar for the future development of destinations, they demonstrate a practical approach—the development of slow tourism—that can be applied by any type of destination. Crucially, this kind of tourism has the potential to contribute to destination sustainability thanks to the fact that it helps tourists demonstrate pro-environmental behaviors. It has also been shown here that one way to develop this type of tourism is to encourage co-creation with tourists through online media, in such a way that it is the tourists themselves who, together with the different agents, build their own personalized slow tourism experience at the destination.

5.5. Limitations and potential future research directions

Like all research, this study presents certain limitations that, in their own right, could constitute potential areas for further research. First, just one tourist destination was analyzed—Spain—but future studies could replicate this approach in different destinations to determine whether similar results are obtained and can be generalized to other contexts.

Second, the cognitive component of the "destination image" variable was exclusively taken into account as it was considered to be the most relevant factor in tourists' learning. It would therefore be of interest to analyze the extent to which the affective component also contributes to enhancing the effect of a "slow destination" image on tourist behavior. Furthermore, scholars dealing with tourism and slow destinations have

expressed an interest in the effect of slow tourism on destination performance and sustainability, calling for further research into how a "slow destination" image can influence the tourist experience.

Third, given that this research has highlighted the important role played by the marketing strategy of online value co-creation, it would be useful to investigate in greater depth other marketing strategies that may contribute to both the creation of the "slow destination" image and also tourist pro-environmental behavior.

Fourth, as the present research was cross-sectional in nature, a future line of research would be to carry out a longitudinal study to identify any changes in tourists' perceptions or behavioral intentions when exposed to changes in how the different components of the "slow destination" image are promoted.

One final line of research for the future could be to analyze differences in attitude toward slow tourism according to demographic factors, or even generational differences.

Fuding details

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Dolores M. Frías-Jamilena: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Ana I. Polo-Peña:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Francisco Peco-Torres:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Software, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Carmen M. Sabiote-Ortíz:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Appendix A. Variable measurement scales

Construct/Item

ONLINE VALUE CO-CREATION (*Frías-Jamilena et al., 2017*)
Interactions through social networks and other technologies with agents from the destination, other tourists, or the local population enabled me to.
   OVC1. Customize a sustainable trip.
   OVC2. Design an authentic local experience.
   OVC3. Enjoy my trip to the fullest while respecting the local community and the environment.
   OVC4. Feel that it is really valuable to share my experiences of the sustainability of the destination.

"SLOW DESTINATION" IMAGE (*Source: the authors, based on Chi & Han, 2020a and b; Manthiou et al., 2022*)
In this destination …

Tourism-friendly
   FRIEND1. Residents are friendly toward tourists.
   FRIEND2. Residents are hospitable and enthusiastic about tourism.
   FRIEND3. Residents are supportive of non-mass tourism.
   FRIEND4. The service staff are attentive and friendly.
   FRIEND5. Overall, my service experiences have been excellent.

Physiography and communication
   PHYSCO1. There are several accessible natural environments.
   PHYSCO2. Natural areas (e.g. forest areas) can be easily visited and viewed.
   PHYSCO3. The signage and signposting around the natural areas are clear and easy to understand.

Social environment
   SOCENV1. The social environment is safe for tourists.
   SOCENV2. The social environment is relaxing and comfortable for the tourist.
   SOCENV3. My general experiences with the social environment have been good.

Heritage and culture
   HERCUL1. It has its own historical and cultural heritage.
   HERCUL2. It has traditional shows and performances.
   HERCUL3. It has a unique architectural style.

Nature-based activities
   NAT1. Various nature-based activities (e.g. hiking or mountaineering) are available.
   NAT2. Quality nature-based activities (e.g. hiking or mountaineering) can be found there.
   NAT3. There are safe and enjoyable nature-based activities.

Accommodation
   ACCOM1. A variety of locally-managed accommodation options are offered.
   ACCOM2. There is a unique accommodation offer.
   ACCOM3. Comfortable and good quality accommodation is offered.
   ACCOM4. My overall experience of the local accommodation has been pleasant.

Local cuisine
   CUIS1. Mainly local ingredients are used in the local cuisine.
   CUIS2. There are local restaurants that use organic and/or ecological products.
   CUIS3. The traditional way of cooking food is preserved.
   CUIS4. The local cuisine is healthy.
   CUIS5. My overall experience of the local cuisine was wonderful.

Local transportation
   TRANS1. The local transport for taking visitors to the main attraction sites is efficient.
   TRANS2. There are a variety of possibilities for ecological transport (for example, bicycles, e-scooters, buses using low-pollution technology …).
   TRANS3. My overall travel experience with local transportation was good.

Handicrafts and shopping
   HANDSHOP1. The local artisanal products are of high quality and value.
   HANDSHOP2. A variety of options are offered to learn about and make local crafts with the guidance of an artisan.
   HANDSHOP3. A wide variety of symbolic and unique souvenirs are available.

PRO-ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOR (*Ballantyne et al., 2011*)
My visit meant that …

Attitude
   ATT1. I now care more about the preservation of the destination in general.
   ATT2. I am now more aware of the impact of tourism on the sustainability of the destination.
   ATT3. The preservation of the destination is more important to me.
   ATT4. I better understand the sustainability issues of the destination.
   ATT5. I am more interested in the conservation of the destination's resources.

Knowledge

KNOW1. I want to do everything I can to protect and conserve the destination's resources.

KNOW2. I value all that I can do to conserve the resources of the destination.

KNOW3. I understand the impact of my activity as a tourist on the sustainability of the destination.

KWNO4. I am interested in discovering more about the sustainability of the destination.

KNOW5. I consider myself part of the solution in conserving the destination's resources.

Behavior

BEHAV1. As a tourist, I feel the need to protect the destination.

BEHAV2. As a tourist, I feel the need to contribute to the sustainability of the destination.

BEHAV3. As a tourist, I realize that the resources of the destination are unique.

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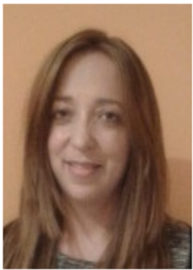
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