International Research Journal of Multidisciplinary Scope (IRJMS), 2026; 7(3): 68-78 IRJMS

Original Article | ISSN (O): 2582-631X DOI: 10.47857/irjms.2026.v07i03.09215

Supplying ESG Assurance in an Emerging Market: A Theory of Planned Behavior Study

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Abstract

As the global focus shifts toward sustainability, the demand for credible Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) information has accelerated. In emerging economies like Vietnam, following the national commitment to Net Zero by 2050, the role of independent assurance has become critical for ensuring financial transparency and investor confidence. While existing literature heavily explores the demand for ESG disclosures, research on the "supply side"-specifically the factors driving audit firms to provide these specialized services-remains remarkably scarce. This study addresses this gap by applying the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to investigate the psychological and organizational determinants influencing the willingness of audit professionals to offer ESG assurance services. A quantitative research design was employed, utilizing a structured survey to collect data from 235 audit professionals across various firms in Vietnam. The conceptual model was tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to evaluate the relationships between the TPB constructs. The empirical findings confirm that a positive Attitude, strong Subjective Norms and high Perceived Behavioral Control all significantly and positively increase an auditor's intention to supply ESG assurance. Notably, Subjective Norms-perceived pressure from clients, industry competitors and regulatory bodies-emerged as the most influential driver in the Vietnamese context. Furthermore, the results indicate that behavioral intention is a robust predictor of the actual provision of these services. This research offers critical insights for audit firms in building internal capacity and for policymakers seeking to cultivate a reliable sustainable finance ecosystem in emerging markets.

Keywords: Emerging market, ESG Assurance, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), Vietnam.

Introduction

Corporate performance assessment has decisively shifted toward Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) factors for long-term value creation (1). This shift reflects a broader transformative trend in contemporary business, where sustainability and evolving stakeholder obligations have become central to corporate strategy and business research paradigms (2). However, the transition to mandatory ESG reporting reveals a significant 'assurance gap,' as ESG data verification often lacks the rigor of financial auditing (3, 4). This disparity is acute as stakeholders increasingly demand reliable non-financial disclosures to evaluate sustainability risks (5). Consequently, independent third-party assurance is crucial to mitigate 'greenwashing' and enhance report reliability (6, 7). These challenges are further exacerbated by a lack of standardized reporting frameworks, which produces inconsistent data that erodes trust (8) and by corporate audit committees frequently lacking the specialized technical expertise needed to oversee ESG risks (3). In response to these multifaceted challenges, regulatory bodies across the globe are instituting stringent mandates, such as the European Union's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive, to enforce standardized and assured ESG reporting (9). This regulatory impetus underscores that high-quality, independent assurance is no longer merely advantageous but essential for enhancing corporate transparency, building stakeholder confidence and ensuring market integrity (10). Given their established expertise, rigorous quality controls and professional skepticism, audit firms are naturally positioned to provide these critical services (11). While ESG assurance is maturing in developed economies, it remains nascent in emerging markets like Vietnam, despite commitments like the National Green Growth Strategy. Rising transparency demands highlight the inadequacy of traditional methodologies for complex ESG data

(Received 15th November 2025; Accepted 02nd June 2026; Published 01st July 2026)

(12). Furthermore, Vietnam's rapid growth creates a fertile yet challenging environment (13), complicated by endemic issues such as unreliable information, weak public monitoring and opaque supply chains (14). Consequently, Vietnamese audit firms must balance revenue and reputational opportunities against hurdles like lacking standards, talent shortages and uncertain demand. This complex behavioral choice warrants dedicated academic inquiry. Despite the growing body of literature on ESG assurance, most studies disproportionately focus on the demand side or are conducted exclusively in the context of developed countries (15). This research disparity is highly quantifiable: a recent systematic review identified only 94 primary studies over three decades, predominantly focusing on demand-side drivers (16). Current bibliometric trends further confirm that while the impact of ESG reporting is examined by thousands of studies, the internal organizational determinants driving the supply side in emerging markets are specifically investigated by less than 5% of them (17).

To directly address this glaring gap, this study employs the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to identify the underlying factors affecting the supply of ESG assurance in Vietnam. The TPB posits that an individual's or organization's behavior is determined by their behavioral intention, which, in turn, is shaped by three core constructs: Attitude (AT), Subjective Norms (SN) and Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC) (18).

First, an organization's AT towards a specific action is determined by its evaluation of the likely outcomes; a favorable assessment is expected to foster a positive Behavioral Intention (BI) to perform the behavior (19). As assurance is a voluntary and costly undertaking, firms must perceive that the strategic benefits outweigh the significant investments required (11).

This calculation is consistent with the broader market for non-audit services, where firms diversify offerings to sustain growth and satisfy evolving customer demands (20). Adjacent research empirically supports a significant positive relationship between a favorable attitude towards ESG and the behavioral intention to invest (21). Consequently, when an audit firm perceives the provision of ESG assurance as a valuable business opportunity, it is more likely to intend to offer it.

H1: A positive AT towards supplying ESG assurance services is positively related to the BI to supply them.

Second, SN capture social expectations from key referents - such as clients, competitors and regulators - that create strong mimetic and normative pressures (22). Globalization compels local audit firms to align with international standards (20), facing rising demands for assured ESG data from multinational clients (11). Furthermore, Vietnam's network-embedded socio-cultural context makes normative pressures from professional groups a powerful behavioral driver, as conforming to collective practices is crucial (14).

H2: SN are positively related to the BI to supply ESG assurance services.

Third, PBC reflects an organization's self-assessed capability regarding skills, resources and methodologies (23), directly influencing both intention and actual Behavior (BEH) (18). The market views auditor assurance as high-quality due to established expertise, which constitutes a firm's PBC (11, 24) and acts as a critical antecedent for market entry (21). While "knowledge spillover" from non-audit services aids in understanding client risks (20), verifying non-financial data poses significant operational barriers (14). Therefore, a firm's perceived ability to overcome these challenges dictates its behavioral control.

H3: PBC is positively related to the BI to supply ESG assurance services.

H4: PBC is positively related to the BEH of supplying ESG assurance services.

Finally, while AT, SN and PBC collectively shape an organization's strategic willingness, the explicit formation of intention serves as the final cognitive precursor to the execution of the behavior (25). This commitment bridges the gap between evaluating the strategic opportunity and undertaking tangible actions. Therefore, to complete the causal chain proposed by the TPB, the final hypothesis tests this crucial link between volition and action:

H5: BI is positively related to the BEH of supplying ESG assurance services.

By integrating these theoretical constructs with the practical realities of the market, this research contributes to the literature by: (a) extending the TPB framework to the non-mandatory field of sustainability assurance; (b) providing empirical

evidence from a transitional emerging market; and (c) offering actionable implications for professional bodies and policymakers to accelerate a credible ESG assurance ecosystem. Figure 1 illustrates the proposed research model of this study.

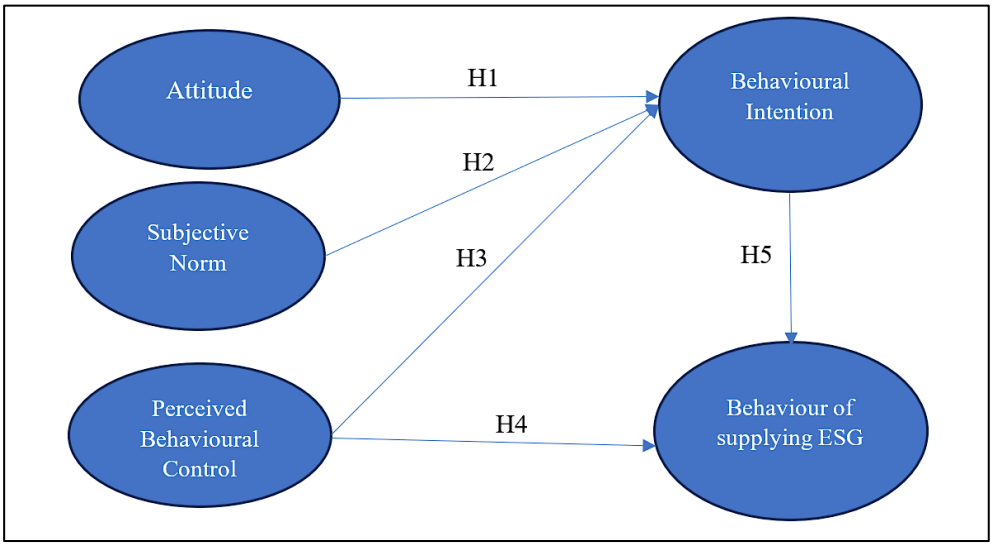

Figure 1: Proposed Research Model

Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey to collect primary data. This positivist approach aligns with contemporary research paradigms that emphasize the need for empirical rigor and objective, quantifiable insights to investigate sustainability and business challenges (2). The target population comprises audit professionals (senior auditors, managers, audit partners and quality control personnel) working at audit firms in Vietnam (approximate GPS coordinates: 14.0583° N, 108.2772° E). This group was selected as they are directly involved in or influence the strategic decisions regarding service offerings. A combination of convenience and snowball sampling techniques was used to distribute the questionnaire. The survey was created using Google Forms and distributed electronically via professional networks (e.g., zalo), email lists from professional accounting bodies and personal contacts within the auditing community in major economic hubs like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. The data collection period spanned from March to June 2025. A total of 243 responses were received. After screening for incomplete or invalid responses, 235 responses were deemed usable for analysis). The final sample size of 235 valid responses was deemed sufficient for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) based on several established criteria. According to the widely cited rule of thumb, a ratio of 5 to 10 observations per estimated parameter is required for reliable SEM estimates (26). In this study, the model consists of 18 observed variables, resulting in approximately 42 estimated parameters. This study's sample-to-parameter ratio is approximately 5.6:1, exceeding the minimum threshold of 5:1. Furthermore, a post-hoc power analysis was conducted (using G*Power), confirming that with n = 235, the model achieves a statistical power (1 – β) exceeding 0.80 at a significance level of 0.05, which is the standard requirement for social science research.

All constructs in the research model were measured using multiple items on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree"). A detailed summary of the measurement items and their respective sources is provided in Table 1. The survey was initially drafted in English, then translated into Vietnamese by a bilingual expert and back translated by another to ensure conceptual equivalence and clarity.

The collected data were analyzed using a two-step approach with IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 26.0 and IBM SPSS AMOS, Version 24.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA).

Preliminary Analysis. This involved descriptive statistics to profile the sample and an assessment of the measurement model's reliability and validity.

Structural Model Analysis. After confirming the adequacy of the measurement model, SEM was used to test the hypothesized relationships between the constructs. The path coefficients (β) and their significance levels (p-values) were examined to confirm or reject the hypotheses.

Table 1: Construct Measurement Items and Sources

	Items	Item detail	References
Attitude (AT)	AT1	Offering ESG assurance services is a good business opportunity for our firm	(11, 20)
	AT2	The potential benefits of supplying ESG assurance outweigh the potential costs and risks	
	AT3	Providing ESG assurance aligns well with our firm's long-term strategic goals	
	AT4	Supplying ESG assurance will improve our firm's competitiveness in the market	
Subjective Norms (SN)	SN1	Our most important clients expect a firm like ours to offer ESG assurance services	(20, 22, 24)
	SN2	Our primary competitors are already offering or are planning to offer ESG assurance services.	
	SN3	There is growing pressure from regulators and standard setters in Vietnam to improve the quality of ESG reporting and assurance	
	SN4	Professional bodies in Vietnam (e.g., VACPA) support and encourage the expansion of audit firms into ESG assurance.	
Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC)	PBC1	Our firm possesses the necessary technical skills and expertise to deliver high-quality ESG assurance	(11, 14, 24)
	PBC2	We have sufficient financial resources to invest in the training and technology required for ESG assurance	
	PBC3	I am confident in our staff's ability to manage the complexities of collecting and verifying non-financial ESG data	
	PBC4	We can hire external subject-matter experts if needed to supplement our internal capabilities	
Behavioral Intention (BI)	BI1	I will support and advocate for the decision to supply ESG assurance services within my firm	(18, 21)
	BI2	Our firm plans to increase its investment in developing ESG assurance capabilities	
	BI3	It is highly probable that our firm will be providing ESG assurance as a core service soon.	
Behavior (BEH)	BEH1	Our firm has formally established a dedicated team or service line for ESG assurance	(11)
	BEH2	Providing ESG assurance is a regular and integrated part of our firm's service offerings.	
	BEH3	We actively and frequently market our ESG assurance services to potential and existing clients.	

Note: AT = Attitude, SN = Subjective Norms, PBC = Perceived Behavioral Control, BI = Behavioral Intention, BEH = Actual Behavior.

Results

Respondent Profile

A total of 235 professionals from Vietnamese audit firms participated in this study. As shown in Table 2, the final sample of 235 respondents covers both Big 4 (32.34%) and non-Big 4 firms (67.66%), which closely mirrors the professional landscape in Vietnam where a few large international firms coexist with numerous local practices. The results indicate that most respondents were male (62.98%). In terms of professional tenure, the sample was highly experienced, with the largest cohorts having 5-10 years (40.85%) and 10-15 years (32.34%) of experience. Only 5.11% of respondents had worked for under 5 years. The positional distribution shows that Seniors were the most represented group (47.66%), followed by Managers (30.21%) and Partners/Directors (22.13%). Overall, the profile reflects a mature and well-positioned sample for investigating the factors influencing the supply of ESG assurance services.

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Firm Type	Big 4	76	32.34
	Non- Big 4	159	67.66
Gender	Male	148	62.98
	Female	87	37.02
Work experience	Under 5 years	12	5.11
	5-under 10 years	96	40.85
	10-under 15 years	76	32.34
	15 years and above	51	21.7
Position	Senior	112	47.66
	Manager	71	30.21
	Partner/Director	52	22.13

Measurement Model Assessment

Before proceeding to the structural analysis, the measurement model's internal consistency and convergent validity were rigorously evaluated. The statistical evidence summarized in Table 3 validates the empirical soundness of the core TPB-related dimensions, including AT, SN, PBC, BI and BEH.

First, the suitability of the data for factor analysis was confirmed using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin values for all constructs ranged from 0.751 to 0.861, well above the recommended threshold of 0.60, indicating sufficient sampling adequacy (27).

The internal consistency reliability of the scales was evaluated using both Cronbach's Alpha and Compositive Reliability. All Cronbach's Alpha values surpassed the conventional 0.70 benchmark, ranging from 0.818 for AT to 0.964 for BI. Similarly, the Compositive Reliability values were excellent, ranging from 0.823 to 0.969, providing strong evidence of the reliability of the measurement scales (26).

To verify that the indicators for each specific latent variable are sufficiently aligned, convergent validity was determined by evaluating both the factor loadings and the Average Variance Extracted. The statistical evidence in Table 3 demonstrates that every individual item loading was statistically significant, with all values surpassing the 0.70 benchmark. Additionally, the Average Variance Extracted for each construct exceeded the 0.50 threshold, with a range between 0.540 and 0.913. These results confirm that the constructs account for more than 50% of the variance among their respective indicators, thereby establishing a high level of convergent validity for the measurement model.

Overall, the statistical outcomes summarized in Table 3 underscore the psychometric quality of the measurement model. By confirming both internal consistency and convergent validity, these results establish a robust prerequisite for the ensuing structural modeling phase and the formal verification of research hypotheses.

Table 3: Factors loading, Cronbach's Alpha, Reliability and Convergent Validity

Factors	Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Factor loadings	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin	Compositive Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
AT	AT1	0.818	0.801	0.764	0.823	0.540
	AT2		0.803			
	AT3		0.865			
	AT4		0.751			
SN	SN1	0.897	0.870	0.845	0.897	0.686
	SN2		0.873			
	SN3		0.892			
	SN4		0.861			
PBC	PBC1	0.932	0.904	0.861	0.932	0.776
	PBC2		0.915			
	PBC3		0.934			

	PBC4		0.893			
BI	BI1	0.964	0.975	0.777	0.969	0.913
	BI2		0.963			
	BI3		0.973			
BEH	BEH1	0.959	0.953	0.751	0.961	0.892
	BEH2		0.976			
	BEH3		0.957			

Note: AT = Attitude, SN = Subjective Norms, PBC = Perceived Behavioural Control, BI = Behavioral Intention, BEH = Actual Behavior.

Correlation and Discriminant Validity Analysis

Once the measurement model's reliability and convergent validity were established, the associations between primary variables were explored through a Pearson correlation matrix. Additionally, to verify that each latent construct represents a unique empirical concept, discriminant validity was evaluated via the Fornell-Larcker method. The outcomes of this analysis are summarized in Table 4, where the square root of the Average Variance Extracted for each dimension is highlighted on the diagonal. To satisfy this criterion, these diagonal values must exceed any off-diagonal correlation coefficients within their respective rows and columns. As shown, the calculated square roots of Average Variance Extracted -comprising 0.881 (PBC), 0.828 (SN), 0.735 (AT), 0.955 (BI) and 0.945 (BEH)-all surpass their corresponding inter-variable correlations. Illustratively, the diagonal value for PBC [0.881] is notably higher than its shared variance with SN [0.514], AT [0.255], BI [0.452] and BEH [0.741]. A comparable pattern is observed for BI, whose square root of Average Variance Extracted [0.955] is superior to its correlation with SN [0.683] and AT [0.513], thereby confirming the model's discriminant validity. These results demonstrate that each construct shares more variance with its own measures than with other constructs, thereby confirming the discriminant validity of the measurement model.

Table 4: Correlation Coefficient among Core Variables

	Perceived Behavioural Control	**Subjective Norms**	**Attitude**	**Behavioral Intention**	**Actual Behavior**
Perceived Behavioural Control	**0.881**				
Subjective Norms	0.514***	**0.828**			
Attitude	0.255***	0.292***	**0.735**		
Behavioral Intention	0.452***	0.683***	0.513***	**0.955**	
Actual Behavior	0.741***	0.711***	0.422***	0.788***	**0.945**

Note: Bold values on the diagonal represent the square root of the AVE. Off-diagonal values are the inter-construct correlations.
*** $p < 0.001$.

Assessment of Structural Model Fit

The statistical performance of the hypothesized structural model is summarized through the fit metrics displayed in Table 5 and Figure 2. Specifically, the normed chi-square was recorded at 1.269, staying well within the conventional limit of 3.0. Regarding absolute fit, the Goodness of Fit Index value reached 0.932, comfortably surpassing the 0.80 minimum requirement. Furthermore, incremental fit measures including the Comparative Fit Index [0.991] and Tucker–Lewis Index [0.990] significantly exceeded the 0.90 baseline, indicating a superior level of alignment. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation of 0.034 is substantially below the 0.08 ceiling, providing further empirical evidence of the model's validity. Lastly, the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual value was 0.0316, which is well below the threshold of 0.08, indicating an excellent fit between the hypothesized model and the empirical data. Collectively, these indicators confirm that the proposed structural framework exhibits a high degree of compatibility with the collected data.

Table 5: Model Fitting Results

Fit index	Recommended Threshold	Observed Value	Evaluation Result	References
CMIN/df	< 3	1.269	Excellent	(26)
Goodness of Fit Index	> 0.8	0.932	Excellent	(26)
Comparative Fit Index	> 0.9	0.991	Excellent	(28)
Tucker–Lewis Index	> 0.9	0.990	Excellent	(28)
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation	< 0.08	0.034	Excellent	(26)
Standardized Root Mean Square Residual	< 0.08	0.0316	Excellent	(28)

Explanatory Power and Predictive Efficacy

The structural model demonstrates substantial explanatory power regarding the auditors' decision-making process. The model explains 58.5% of the variance in BI to provide ESG assurance, which exceeds the threshold for "moderate to substantial" predictive efficacy in behavioral science (26). Furthermore, the model accounts for 81.1% of BEH, indicating that the integrated TPB framework is highly effective in predicting how professional auditors translate their intentions into practice. These findings underscore the robustness of the model in capturing the critical drivers of ESG assurance adoption.

Hypothesis Testing Results

Table 6 summarizes the results of hypothesis testing. The path from AT to BI is positive and significant (β = 0.333, Compositive Reliability = 5.912, p < 0.001), supporting H1. Similarly, SN positively influences BI (β = 0.549, Compositive Reliability = 8.561, p < 0.001), thus supporting H2. In contrast, the relationship between PBC and BI is not significant (β = 0.079, Compositive Reliability = 1.360, p = 0.174), leading to the rejection of H3. Meanwhile, PBC has a strong positive effect on BEH (β = 0.486, Compositive Reliability = 11.700, p < 0.001), supporting H4. Finally, BI significantly predicts BEH (β = 0.570, Compositive Reliability = 14.079, p < 0.001), providing support for H5.

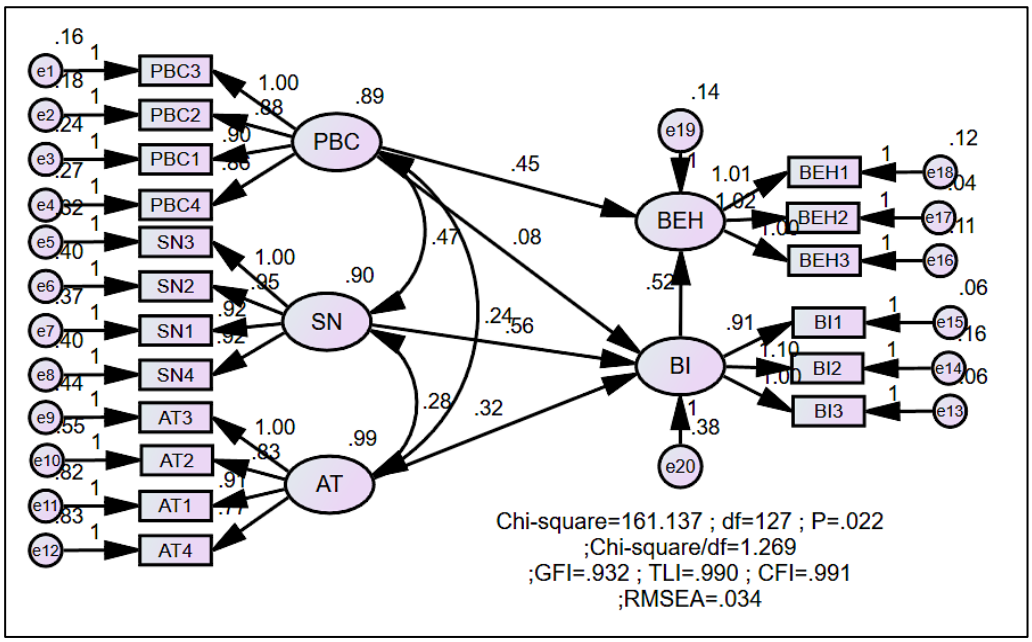

Figure 2: Research Model Values

Overall, four hypotheses (H1, H2, H4, H5) were supported, while H3 was rejected. These results indicate that AT, SN and BI are significant determinants of behaviour, whereas PBC does not significantly shape intention but directly influences behaviour.

Table 6: Results of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	Std. Beta (β)	Critical Ratio	p-value	Result
H1	AT → BI	0.333	5.912	0.000	Supported
H2	SN → BI	0.549	8.561	0.000	Supported
H3	PBC → BI	0.079	1.360	0.174	Rejected
H4	PBC → BEH	0.486	11.700	0.000	Supported
H5	BI → BEH	0.570	14.079	0.000	Supported

Note: AT = Attitude, SN = Subjective Norms, PBC = Perceived Behavioural Control, BI = Behavioral Intention, BEH = Actual Behavior. Std. Beta (β) = Standardized Beta Coefficient.

Mediation Analysis Results

To further clarify the structural mechanism, a mediation analysis using the bootstrapping method (5,000 resamples) was performed. As shown in Table 7, BI significantly mediates the relationships between AT (β = 0.190, [0.114, 0.254]) and SN (β = 0.313, [0.217, 0.383]) towards BEH, as their 95% confidence intervals do not include zero. Conversely, the indirect effect for PBC was not supported (β = 0.045, [-0.025, 0.093]), confirming that PBC's influence on BEH is primarily direct rather than mediated through intention.

Table 7: Mediation Analysis

Path	Indirect Effect (β)	Lower Bound (BC 95%)	Upper Bound (BC 95%)	Result
AT → BI → BEH	0.190	0.114	0.254	Supported
SN → BI → BEH	0.313	0.217	0.383	Supported
PBC → BI → BEH	0.045	-0.025	0.093	Rejected

Note: AT = Attitude, SN = Subjective Norms, PBC = Perceived Behavioural Control, BI = Behavioural Intention, BEH = Actual Behaviour. BC 95% = Bias-Corrected 95% Confidence Interval.

Discussion

This study set out to investigate the determinants of Vietnamese audit firms' intention and behaviour to supply ESG assurance services, using TPB as a guiding framework. The structural model analysis yielded several significant and one particularly noteworthy, finding that warrants detailed discussion.

Regarding BI, SN emerged as the dominant driver (β = 0.549, p < 0.001), representing a large effect size. Interestingly, while AT plays a secondary role, PBC was found to have no statistically significant impact on BI. However, when examining actual BEH, the dynamics shift. BI remains the strongest predictor (β = 0.570), but PBC now exerts a significant and substantial direct effect (β = 0.486). This indicates that while PBC doesn't stop auditors from wanting to provide services, it acts as a critical "enabler" or "barrier" when they perform the task. In other words, the transition from intention to action is heavily dependent on the firm's actual resources and technical capabilities.

The results confirm that the decision for an audit firm in Vietnam to supply ESG assurance is a complex behavioural choice, shaped significantly by attitudinal and normative factors. The strong support for H1 (AT → BI, β = 0.333) aligns with established TPB literature, indicating that audit firms are making a rational, strategic calculation. A positive AT, formed from perceiving ESG assurance as a valuable business opportunity with benefits that outweigh the costs (11, 20), is a powerful motivator for forming the intention to act.

Perhaps the most compelling finding is the substantial influence of SN on BI (H2, β = 0.549), which emerged as the strongest predictor of a firm's willingness to supply ESG assurance. This suggests that, in the current Vietnamese context, the decision to enter this market is driven more by perceived external pressures than by any other factor. This may reflect the socio-cultural importance of collective practices and conforming to group expectations (14). It also aligns with the notion that in emerging markets with less-developed regulatory frameworks, stakeholder pressures from multinational clients, competitors and international stakeholders fill the void, becoming the primary impetus for change (11, 25). Audit firms appear to be forming their intentions based on a clear signal from the market that this service is becoming a new professional norm.

The most unexpected result was the rejection of H3, which hypothesized a link between TPB and BI.

The data indicate that a firm's self-assessed capability does not significantly influence its intention to supply ESG assurance. This is a notable deviation from the traditional TPB model. A plausible explanation is that in a nascent and rapidly evolving market, strategic intention is aspirational. Firms may form the intention to act based on market opportunities and pressures first, with the plan to develop the necessary capabilities later. The desire to enter the market precedes the practical consideration of how to do so.

This interpretation is strongly supported by the robust, significant relationship found between PBC and actual BE (H4, $\beta = 0.486$). This finding is crucial. While a firm's capability may not shape its initial desire, it is essential for execution. A firm cannot ultimately supply a service it is not competent to deliver. This underscores that PBC acts not as a motivator for intention, but as a direct enabler of action. This aligns perfectly with the literature emphasizing that the core market value of accounting firms is their proven expertise and quality control (11, 25).

The strong positive relationship between BI and BE (H5, $\beta = 0.570$) confirms the central predictive power of the TPB framework (18, 25). This indicates that the stated intentions of audit firms are not merely abstract, but are a reliable predictor of their subsequent actions, such as investing in training and actively offering the service.

The mediation results provide a robust explanation for the substantial variance explained in BEH ($R^2 = 81.1\%$). The findings confirm that BI acts as a critical transmission bridge for SN and AT. Specifically, the strong indirect effect of SN ($\beta = 0.313$) suggests that stakeholder expectations successfully translate into actual service provision because they first build a solid behavioral intention. In contrast, the rejection of PBC's mediation path reinforces the "action-only" role of technical capability in this context: while resource constraints do not necessarily dampen an auditor's desire to provide ESG assurance (non-significant mediation), they directly dictate whether that intention can be successfully executed into actual behavior ($\beta = 0.486$). This clear distinction explains why the overall model achieves such high predictive efficacy for actual behavior.

Conclusion

Practical Implications for Audit Firms

The message for audit firms in Vietnam is twofold. Firstly, they must remain highly attuned to market signals and normative pressures, as these are the primary drivers of strategic direction in the ESG domain. Ignoring these trends will likely result in a loss of competitiveness. Secondly and more critically, firms must recognize that intention alone is insufficient. The direct path from capability to action implies that a proactive and substantial investment in building genuine ESG competence - through training, hiring specialists and developing robust methodologies - is the only viable path to successfully executing an ESG assurance strategy.

Policy Implications for Regulators and Professional Bodies

For bodies such as the Vietnamese Ministry of Finance and the Vietnam Association of Certified Public Accountants, the findings offer clear direction. To foster a healthy and high-quality ESG assurance market, policy should focus on boosting industry-wide PBC. This can be achieved by: (a) developing clear, localized assurance standards to reduce ambiguity; (b) sponsoring or subsidizing specialized training programmes to build a talent pipeline; and (c) creating forums for knowledge sharing. By enhancing the actual and perceived capabilities of firms, regulators can directly facilitate the translation of market demand into a credible supply of assurance services.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The conclusions of this study should be considered considering its limitations. The cross-sectional research design precludes inferences of causality and the reliance on self-reported data may be subject to social desirability bias. Furthermore, the focus on a single country limits the generalizability of the findings.

Future research could build on this study in several ways. A longitudinal study would be invaluable for tracking how the intentions of audit firms evolve into tangible behaviours over time. Qualitative research, through in-depth interviews with audit partners, could provide richer insights into the nuanced reasons why perceived control does not appear to influence intention. Finally, a comparative study across several ASEAN countries could reveal how different regulatory and cultural

contexts moderate the relationships identified in this paper.

Third, while this study provides a holistic view of the ESG assurance supply side, the structural pathways may potentially vary across different firm types (Big 4 versus non-Big 4) or hierarchical positions (Seniors, Managers and Partners). Due to sample size constraints within these specific sub-groups in the current dataset (e.g., n=76 for Big 4 and n=52 for Partners), conducting a robust Multi-Group Analysis (MGA) using SEM was not statistically feasible. Future research with larger, stratified datasets is highly encouraged to explore these multi-group differences, which could substantially enhance the understanding of organizational heterogeneity in ESG assurance readiness.

Abbreviations

AT: Attitude, BEH: Behavior, BI: Behavioral Intention, ESG: Environmental, Social and Governance, PBC: Perceived Behavioral Control, SEM: Structural Equation Modeling, SN: Subjective Norms, TPB: Theory of Planned Behavior.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank the participants of the survey for their valuable contributions to this study.

Author Contributions

Nguyen Thu Hoai: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Validation, Draft Manuscript Preparation.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that no financial or non-financial competing interests in any material discussed in this paper.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions regarding the anonymity of the survey participants.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

The authors declare that they did not use AIassisted tools (ChatGPT, OpenAI) during the writing process. The authors take full responsibility for the content's originality, interpretation and accuracy.

Ethics Approval

Ethical approval was not required for this research as it does not involve human subjects, animal experiments, or sensitive data.

Funding

No funding was received from any financial organization to conduct this research.

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How to Cite: Hoai NT. Supplying ESG Assurance in an Emerging Market: A Theory of Planned Behavior Study. Int Res J Multidiscip Scope. 2026; 7(3): 68-78. DOI: 10.47857/irjms.2026.v07i03.09215