HUMAN CAPITAL AND BUSINESS NETWORKS DRIVING TOURISM INDUSTRY SUCCESS: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL INNOVATION IN THE UPPER CENTRAL REGION OF THAILAND*

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Abstract

This study examines the roles of human capital, business networks, and organizational innovation in driving tourism industry success and sustainable development in the Upper Central Region of Thailand. It further investigates the complex relationships among these variables and their influence on the performance and sustainability of tourism enterprises. A mixed-methods research design was employed: quantitative data were gathered from 400 tourism SMEs via structured questionnaires, while qualitative insights were obtained through in-depth interviews with 15 key informants, including entrepreneurs and industry stakeholders. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) for quantitative measures, complemented by qualitative content analysis to interpret contextual mechanisms and challenges.

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The findings indicate that human capital, business networks, and organizational innovation currently stand at a moderate level, reflecting gaps in digital proficiency, knowledge sharing, and external collaboration. All three factors significantly impact industry success, with organizational innovation identified as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.378, p < 0.001$), followed by human capital ($\beta = 0.315, p < 0.001$) and business networks ($\beta = 0.298, p < 0.001$). Furthermore, organizational innovation serves as a vital mediator, transforming internal capabilities and external partnerships into enhanced performance and long-term sustainability. Qualitative evidence underscores the necessity of adaptive leadership, digital adoption, and collaborative networks for organizational resilience and post-crisis recovery. Consequently, the study recommends enhancing digital literacy, fostering stakeholder synergy, and implementing innovation-driven policies to fortify the resilience and sustainability of tourism SMEs.

Keywords: Human Capital, Business Networks, Organizational Innovation, Tourism SMEs, Sustainable Tourism Development, and Innovation Capability

Introduction

According to the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (2024), digital tourism development and sustainable tourism policies have become important national strategies in Thailand to enhance tourism competitiveness and regional economic growth. The Upper Central Region of Thailand is recognized for its cultural heritage, historical attractions, and community-based tourism potential, where tourism SMEs significantly contribute to local economies and employment. However, rapid digital transformation and changing tourist expectations have increased pressure on tourism enterprises to adapt and innovate, while many SMEs still face limitations in human capital, business networks, and innovation

capability, which constrain their long-term competitiveness and sustainability (UNWTO, 2023; Hall et al., 2020).

From a theoretical perspective, this study integrates human capital theory, social network theory, and innovation theory to provide a comprehensive lens for understanding tourism enterprise performance. Human capital theory underscores knowledge, skills, and competencies as strategic assets that enhance productivity and adaptability. Social network theory emphasizes inter-organizational relationships and collaborative networks that facilitate resource exchange, knowledge sharing, and innovation diffusion. Meanwhile, innovation theory and the dynamic capability perspective suggest that organizational innovation enables firms to reconfigure resources in response to environmental changes. Although prior research has recognized these factors, most studies examine them in isolation or through linear models that overlook their interdependent and synergistic nature. Notably, empirical evidence remains limited on how organizational innovation mediates the relationship between internal capabilities (human capital) and external linkages (business networks) in driving the success and sustainable development of tourism SMEs, particularly in developing regions.

This gap is particularly evident in the Upper Central Region of Thailand, where tourism SMEs operate in a complex and evolving environment shaped by digitalization, policy interventions, and post-crisis recovery dynamics. Despite increasing investments in digital technologies and policy support to enhance competitiveness, many enterprises still struggle to translate resources into tangible performance outcomes. This indicates that the challenge lies not in resource availability but in the capability to integrate and transform resources into value-creating innovations. Therefore, a more integrated and mechanism-based understanding is needed to explain how human capital and business

networks interact through organizational innovation to influence tourism success and sustainability.

Accordingly, this study addresses these theoretical and empirical gaps by developing and testing an integrated conceptual framework linking human capital, business networks, and organizational innovation to tourism success and sustainable development. Specifically, it examines both direct and mediating effects using a mixed-methods approach, offering a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms driving tourism SME performance. The study contributes in three ways: (1) advancing theory through a synergistic Human Capital–Business Networks–Organizational Innovation (HC–BN–OI) model within a dynamic capability framework; (2) providing empirical evidence on the mediating role of organizational innovation; and (3) offering practical insights for policymakers and stakeholders by identifying strategic drivers that enhance resilience, innovation capacity, and sustainability in tourism SMEs.

Objective

1. To examine the individual and combined effects of human capital, business networks, and organizational innovation on tourism industry success and sustainable development in the Upper Central Region of Thailand.

2. To explain the relationships among human capital, business networks, organizational innovation, and tourism industry success in the Upper Central Region of Thailand.

Literature Review

The literature review demonstrates that human capital, business networks, and organizational innovation are critical determinants of tourism industry success and sustainable development within tourism SMEs. Human capital theory emphasizes that employee knowledge, skills, leadership

capability, and training significantly enhance service quality, adaptability, and innovation capability, which are essential in highly competitive and service-oriented tourism environments (Becker, 1993; Lu et al., 2023; Bangbon et al., 2023). However, tourism SMEs in developing regions continue to face limitations in digital competencies and strategic capability development, constraining their competitiveness and long-term sustainability (Hall et al., 2020).

In parallel, business networks are recognized as important relational resources that facilitate organizational learning, knowledge sharing, collaboration, and access to external opportunities within tourism ecosystems (Gulati et al., 2000; Putnam, 2000). Strong collaborative relationships among tourism enterprises, local communities, and government agencies contribute significantly to destination competitiveness and organizational resilience. Nevertheless, fragmented stakeholder collaboration remains a major challenge limiting the effective utilization of network-based advantages in many tourism destinations (Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2021).

Furthermore, organizational innovation emerges as a critical transformative capability that enables tourism SMEs to improve operational efficiency, customer experience, service development, and competitive advantage through adaptive and innovative practices (Limlahapun & Kanchanathaveekul, 2019). Grounded in dynamic capability theory, organizational innovation reflects the ability of firms to integrate and reconfigure internal and external resources in response to environmental change (Teece et al., 1997). Prior studies confirm that innovation significantly enhances tourism performance, destination competitiveness, and sustainable tourism development (Damasceno et al., 2021; Saeng-on et al., 2023; Suherman et al., 2024).

Importantly, the reviewed literature suggests that organizational innovation functions as a mediating mechanism that transforms human capital

and business networks into improved tourism industry success. This synthesis establishes a clear theoretical and empirical linkage among the study variables and supports the proposed conceptual framework, which explains how internal capabilities and external collaborative resources jointly contribute to sustainable competitiveness in tourism SMEs.

Integration of HC–BN–OI and Research Gap

This study highlights the research gap regarding the lack of empirical evidence on the interaction among human capital, business networks, and organizational innovation. In particular, it emphasizes the mediating role of organizational innovation in driving the success and sustainability of tourism SMEs in the Upper Central Region of Thailand.

This study highlights the research gap regarding the lack of empirical evidence on the interaction among human capital, business networks, and organizational innovation. In particular, it emphasizes the mediating role of organizational innovation in driving the success and sustainability of tourism SMEs in the Upper Central Region of Thailand. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed: H1: Human Capital positively influences Organizational Innovation and Tourism Industry Success in the Upper Central Region of Thailand. H2: Business Networks positively influence Organizational Innovation and Tourism Industry Success in the Upper Central Region of Thailand. H3: Organizational Innovation positively influences Tourism Industry Success in the Upper Central Region of Thailand. H4: Tourism Industry Success positively influences Sustainable Development in the Upper Central Region of Thailand.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a pragmatic research paradigm and employs a mixed-methods approach using an explanatory sequential design. The design enables

the study to examine the relationships among human capital, business networks, organizational innovation, and tourism industry success through quantitative analysis, followed by qualitative inquiry to explain the underlying mechanisms and contextual factors. This approach is appropriate for tourism SMEs research and supports the integration of human capital, social capital, and dynamic capability theories.

Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of tourism SMEs operating in the Upper Central Region of Thailand. The sampling frame was obtained from registered tourism enterprise databases provided by the Department of Tourism. Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure representation across tourism business types and geographic locations, including Ayutthaya, Lop Buri, and Saraburi. A total of 400 valid responses were collected, which is sufficient for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and supports the reliability and generalizability of the findings.

Instrument Development and Quantitative Data Analysis

The research instrument was developed based on established theories and prior empirical studies to ensure construct validity and theoretical consistency. Human Capital (HC), Business Networks (BN), and Organizational Innovation (OI) were adapted from relevant theoretical foundations, while Tourism Industry Success (TS) was derived from tourism performance literature. The questionnaire consisted of 39 items measured using a five-point Likert scale. Content validity was evaluated by three experts in tourism and business research. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) confirmed acceptable validity and reliability of the measurement model, with all statistical indicators meeting recommended criteria.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to examine the

hypothesized relationships and mediating effects within the conceptual framework.

Qualitative Research Design and Data Integration

The qualitative phase was conducted to explain and extend the quantitative findings. Purposive sampling was used to select 15 key informants, including tourism SME owners, managers, and tourism network representatives with experience in innovation and collaborative tourism practices.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews based on the study's conceptual framework, covering human capital, business networks, organizational innovation, and tourism industry success. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006), supported by NVivo software. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, peer debriefing, and consistency checks.

Finally, quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated at the interpretation stage, where qualitative insights were used to explain the mechanisms underlying the statistical relationships, particularly the mediating role of organizational innovation in transforming human capital and business networks into tourism industry success.

Results

The results of Research Objective 1: Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) provide strong empirical support for the proposed hypotheses and confirm the significant roles of human capital, business networks, organizational innovation, and tourism industry success in promoting sustainable development in the Upper Central Region of Thailand. The findings reveal that Human Capital (HC) has a significant positive effect on Organizational Innovation (OI) and Tourism Industry Success (TS), supporting H1. Similarly, Business Networks (BN) significantly and positively influence Organizational Innovation and Tourism Industry Success,

supporting H2. Organizational Innovation demonstrates the strongest positive effect on Tourism Industry Success (β = 0.378, $p < 0.001$), supporting H3 and highlighting innovation capability as a critical driver of competitiveness and performance among tourism SMEs. Furthermore, the tourism industry's success significantly contributes to Sustainable Development, supporting H4 and indicating that improved tourism performance enhances long-term economic and community sustainability in the region.

Among the predictors, Organizational Innovation exhibited the strongest effect, followed by Human Capital (β = 0.315) and Business Networks (β = 0.298), suggesting that internal capabilities and collaborative resources achieve greater performance outcomes when effectively transformed through innovation processes. These findings are consistent with human capital theory, social capital theory, and dynamic capability theory, which collectively explain how organizational resources and networks contribute to sustainable tourism competitiveness.

The measurement model also demonstrated strong validity and reliability. The KMO value of 0.923 indicated excellent sampling adequacy, while factor loadings ranged from 0.682 to 0.892, exceeding recommended thresholds. In addition, Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values satisfied established SEM criteria, confirming the robustness and credibility of the measurement and structural models.

Research Objective 2 sought to explain the relationships among human capital, business networks, organizational innovation, and the success of the tourism industry in the Upper Central Region of Thailand. The SEM results indicate that Human Capital significantly and positively influences Organizational Innovation (β = 0.431, $p < 0.001$), while Business Networks also significantly and positively influence Organizational Innovation (β = 0.351, $p < 0.001$). These

findings confirm that both internal capabilities and external collaborative relationships are important drivers of innovation capability within tourism SMEs.

Furthermore, Organizational Innovation significantly contributes to Tourism Industry Success and functions as a mediating mechanism that transforms human capital and business networks into improved performance outcomes. This finding supports the dynamic capability perspective, which emphasizes the importance of integrating and reconfiguring organizational resources to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. In the context of tourism SMEs, innovation capability plays a central role in enhancing competitiveness, adaptability, and long-term sustainability.

Qualitative Findings

The quantitative results confirm that human capital, business networks, and organizational innovation significantly influence tourism industry success, while the qualitative findings from interviews with 15 tourism SME owners, managers, and tourism network representatives explain the mechanisms underlying these relationships. The interview data reveal that leadership capability, skill development, collaboration, and knowledge sharing enhance organizational innovation, which subsequently improves service quality, operational efficiency, customer experience, and sustainable tourism performance.

The integrated findings indicate that tourism industry success is achieved through the combined effect of internal capabilities and external collaboration. Human capital strengthens knowledge, leadership, and adaptive capability, while business networks enhance collaboration and resource sharing. Organizational innovation integrates these resources into improved service quality, operational efficiency, customer experience, and sustainable tourism performance, particularly through digital technology adoption and innovation-driven strategies.

Table 2 Summary of Research Hypotheses and Integrated Findings

Research Objective	Key Relationship	Quantitative Findings (SEM)	Qualitative Insights	Integrated Interpretation	Theoretical Contribution	Practical Implications
Objective 1: Examine drivers of tourism success	HC ⟶ OI	β = 0.431 (strong effect)	Skills, leadership, and training improve adaptability	Human capital strengthens innovation capability	Supports Human Capital Theory in tourism SMEs	Invest in employee training and leadership development
	BN ⟶ OI	β = 0.351 (moderate–strong)	Collaboration enhances knowledge sharing and market access	Networks enable resource exchange and innovation	Supports Social Capital & Network Theory	Strengthen partnerships and tourism networks
	OI ⟶ Tourism Success	β = 0.378 (strong effect)	Innovation improves service quality and operations	Innovation is the key driver of competitiveness	Supports Dynamic Capability Theory	Promote innovation, adoption, and digital transformation
Objective 2: Sustainability linkage	Tourism Success ⟶ Sustainable Development	Significant positive effect	Business growth supports community and long-term development	Performance leads to sustainability outcomes	Links performance to sustainability theory	Develop policies supporting sustainable tourism
Integrated Model	HC + BN ⟶ OI ⟶ Tourism Success	All paths significant	Interview confirms synergy of factors	Resources + Networks ⟶ Innovation ⟶ Performance	HC–BN–OI Synergy Model (New Knowledge)	Integrated strategy for resilience and competitiveness

Table 2 indicates that human capital, business networks, and organizational innovation interact synergistically to enhance tourism competitiveness, resilience, and sustainable development. The findings suggest that tourism SMEs should strengthen employee capabilities, collaborative partnerships, and innovation-driven practices to achieve long-term competitiveness and sustainable tourism growth.

Discussion

The findings for Research Objectives 1 and 2 support the proposed hypotheses by confirming that human capital, business networks, and organizational innovation significantly influence tourism industry success. Among these variables, organizational innovation demonstrated the strongest effect, highlighting its critical role in transforming organizational resources and collaborative capabilities into competitive advantage and sustainable tourism performance.

The findings are consistent with Dynamic Capability Theory (Teece et al., 1997), which emphasizes that firms achieve superior performance through the effective integration and reconfiguration of internal and external resources. The results also support previous studies by Damasceno et al. (2021) and Suherman et al. (2024), which identified innovation capability as a critical determinant of tourism competitiveness. However, the present study extends prior research by demonstrating that organizational innovation functions not only as a direct driver of tourism industry success but also as a mediating mechanism linking human capital and business networks to sustainable tourism performance within tourism SMEs in developing regional contexts.

New Knowledge from the Research

This study develops the HC–BN–OI Synergy Model by integrating human capital, business networks, and organizational innovation into a unified dynamic capability framework explaining tourism industry success and sustainable development. The findings demonstrate that organizational innovation functions as the key mediating mechanism that transforms employee capability and collaborative networks into competitiveness, resilience, digital adaptation, and sustainable tourism performance.

The study extends Human Capital Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Dynamic Capability Theory by emphasizing that tourism SMEs achieve sustainable competitiveness not through isolated resources, but through the effective integration of internal capabilities, external collaboration, and innovation-driven practices. In addition, the findings provide contextual insights into tourism SMEs in the Upper Central Region of Thailand, particularly regarding digital transformation, post-crisis recovery, and sustainable tourism development in rapidly changing environments.

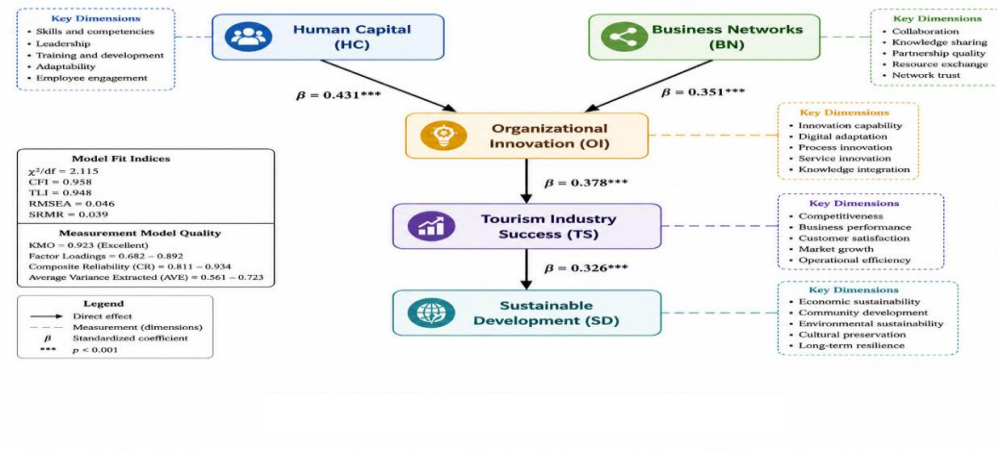


Figure 1 Integrated Dynamic Capability Framework for Tourism Industry Success and Sustainable Development *(Source: Authors, based on SEM results)*

Figure 1 illustrates the HC–BN–OI Synergy Model, which explains how human capital and business networks jointly strengthen organizational innovation as a dynamic capability mechanism that drives tourism industry success and sustainable development. The model demonstrates that innovation capability functions as the central mediating process transforming organizational resources and collaborative relationships into competitiveness, resilience, and long-term sustainability in tourism SMEs.

Conclusion

This study concludes that human capital, business networks, and organizational innovation collectively drive tourism industry success and sustainable development in the Upper Central Region of Thailand. Among these factors, organizational innovation emerged as the strongest contributor, functioning as the key mechanism through which employee capability, leadership, collaboration, and knowledge sharing are transformed into competitiveness, resilience, and sustainable tourism performance.

The study advances tourism and business management literature through the development of the HC–BN–OI Synergy Model, which integrates Human Capital Theory, Social Capital Theory, Dynamic Capability Theory, and the Knowledge-Based View into a unified framework. The findings demonstrate that sustainable tourism competitiveness does not arise from isolated resources, but from the effective integration of internal capabilities, collaborative networks, and innovation-driven practices.

The findings also provide practical implications by emphasizing the importance of workforce capability development, collaborative tourism ecosystems, and digital innovation strategies in strengthening tourism resilience and sustainable regional development under conditions of rapid environmental and technological change.

Recommendation

1. Suggestions from the Research

1.1 The findings indicate that human capital plays a crucial role in enhancing tourism competitiveness through employee competencies, digital literacy, adaptive capability, innovation skills, and leadership development. Therefore, tourism enterprises should prioritize systematic human resource development by implementing continuous training programs focusing on digital skills, service innovation, smart tourism management, and data-driven decision-making. Universities, vocational institutions, and government agencies should collaborate in developing lifelong learning and professional upskilling programs that strengthen workforce capability and adaptive capacity in the tourism sector.

1.2 The study highlights the importance of business networks in supporting tourism competitiveness, innovation capability, and organizational resilience. Tourism enterprises should actively establish collaborative partnerships with local communities, tourism associations, government agencies, digital platforms, and related businesses in order to facilitate knowledge exchange, resource sharing, and joint problem-solving. Strengthening digital ecosystems and platform-based collaboration can help tourism SMEs improve operational efficiency, market accessibility, and destination competitiveness in increasingly interconnected tourism environments.

1.3 Since organizational innovation was identified as the strongest predictor of tourism industry success, tourism enterprises should emphasize innovation-oriented management practices, digital service platforms, smart tourism systems, and technology adoption in both service delivery and operational processes. Policymakers and tourism development agencies should support tourism SMEs through innovation support programs, technology training, financial incentives, and digital transformation policies that strengthen innovation capability, adaptability, and long-term competitiveness.

1.4 The findings suggest that the synergy among human capital, business networks, and organizational innovation significantly contributes to resilience, sustainability, and long-term tourism development. Therefore, policymakers should promote integrated tourism ecosystems by encouraging cooperation among tourism enterprises, local governments, educational institutions, community organizations, and digital service providers. Such collaboration can strengthen sustainable tourism planning, improve regional competitiveness, support post-crisis tourism recovery, and enhance long-term resilience in uncertain tourism environments.

2. Suggestions for Future Research

2.1 Future studies should conduct comparative or cross-regional research across different regions of Thailand and ASEAN countries in order to examine whether the relationships among human capital, business networks, organizational innovation, and tourism sustainability operate similarly under different tourism contexts and socio-economic conditions. Comparative research would improve the generalizability of the HC–BN–OI Synergy Model and provide deeper insights into regional tourism development patterns.

2.2 Future research should employ longitudinal research designs to investigate how tourism enterprises develop, transform, and sustain organizational capabilities over time, particularly during periods of economic uncertainty, tourism disruption, crisis recovery, and digital transformation. Longitudinal data would provide a deeper understanding of how human capital, collaborative networks, and innovation capability evolve and contribute to long-term organizational resilience and sustainable tourism competitiveness.

2.3 Future studies should expand the HC–BN–OI conceptual framework by incorporating additional variables such as digital transformation capability, smart tourism readiness, sustainability orientation, destination competitiveness, artificial intelligence adoption, and environmental governance (ESG). Advanced analytical approaches such as mixed methods research, big data analytics, social

network analysis, and AI-driven tourism analytics may also be applied to better understand how tourism enterprises transform organizational resources into innovation, competitiveness, resilience, and sustainable development within increasingly complex tourism ecosystems.

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