

CREATIVE LEADERSHIP, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN GREEN DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT: A TOURIST PERSPECTIVE STUDY IN RURAL LOWER NORTHERN THAILAND*

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the effects of creative leadership and social media utilization on green destination development, with cultural change acting as a mediating variable, from the tourist perspective in rural communities of Lower Northern Thailand. The research adopts a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of sustainable tourism dynamics. The quantitative component employed a structured questionnaire administered to 400 tourists, selected using stratified random sampling across four provinces in Lower Northern Thailand. Data were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the hypothesized relationships. The qualitative component involved in-depth interviews with 40 key informants, including community leaders and tourism practitioners, with data analyzed through thematic analysis.

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The findings reveal that cultural change exerts the strongest direct effect on green destination development ($\beta = 0.35$), followed by creative leadership ($\beta = 0.31$) and social media utilization ($\beta = 0.27$). In addition, cultural change partially mediates the relationships between creative leadership, social media utilization, and sustainable tourism outcomes. The model demonstrates strong explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.62$), indicating that green destination development is driven by the synergistic interaction of leadership, digital engagement, and cultural transformation. Qualitative findings further highlight that creative leadership fosters community participation and innovation, social media enhances destination identity through digital storytelling, and cultural change embeds sustainability into everyday practices. This study contributes to the literature by shifting the analytical focus from internal stakeholder management to a tourist-centered perspective, and by positioning cultural change as a key behavioral mechanism in sustainable tourism development. The findings provide practical implications for policymakers and practitioners in promoting culturally grounded and environmentally sustainable tourism in rural contexts.

Keywords: Creative leadership; Social media utilization; Cultural change; Green destination development; Sustainable tourism

Introduction

Rural areas are increasingly recognised as essential for sustainable tourism development due to their reliance on natural and cultural resources (UNWTO, 2022). Following the pandemic, green destination development has become a key requirement for resilience and long-term sustainability. In Thailand, although public policies support environmentally responsible rural tourism, traditional hierarchical governance systems continue to limit flexibility, participation, and community-level innovation. This structural rigidity creates a gap between policy intentions and local implementation.

Despite continuous policy support, rural areas in Lower Northern Thailand still struggle to build competitive green tourism images aligned with environmentally conscious tourists (OECD, 2021). While leadership and digital technologies are recognised as key drivers, top-down approaches often limit meaningful transformation. In this context, Creative Leadership is proposed as a critical mechanism, as it emphasizes participatory decision-making and adaptive innovation, which directly counter the limitations of hierarchical governance structures. At the same time, Social Media serves as a platform for value co-creation and digital storytelling, fostering dynamic engagement between destinations and tourists. However, without deeper structural and behavioural transformation, their impacts may remain superficial.

In rural communities in Lower Northern Thailand, sustainable development requires not only governance and technology but also community-level adaptation. This study identifies Cultural Change as a key mediating mechanism, as it reflects the internalization of sustainability into shared norms and everyday practices (Schein & Schein, 2021). Compared to alternative constructs such as social capital or institutional support, cultural change more directly captures the behavioural dimension of sustainability that ensures long-term continuity. Importantly, this study adopts a tourist perspective, addressing a critical gap in the literature. Although tourists are external observers, they can infer creative leadership and cultural change through observable indicators such as community participation, authenticity of experiences, consistency of environmental practices, and digital narratives communicated via social media.

Therefore, this study develops and empirically tests an integrated framework linking creative leadership, social media utilisation, and cultural change to green destination development from a tourist perspective. Using a mixed-methods approach, it explains how leadership and digital engagement are translated into sustainable outcomes, while highlighting the mediating role of

cultural change and offering practical implications for policymakers and destination managers.

Objectives

1) To examine the effects of creative leadership and social media utilization on green destination development in rural communities of Lower Northern Thailand.

2) To investigate the mediating role of cultural change in the relationships between creative leadership, social media utilization, and green destination development.

3) To develop and empirically test an integrated conceptual framework explaining green destination development from the tourist perspective.

4) To explore how leadership, digital engagement, and cultural transformation interact to shape sustainable tourism outcomes.

Hypotheses

The manuscript explicitly proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Creative Leadership has a significant positive influence on Green Destination Development.

H2: Social Media Utilization has a significant positive influence on Green Destination Development.

H3: Cultural Change mediates the relationships between Creative Leadership, Social Media Utilization, and Green Destination Development.

Literature Review

This study conceptualises green destination development as a dynamic and co-evolutionary process shaped by the interaction of leadership, digital participation, and shared cultural values, rather than by isolated factors. Drawing

on systems theory, rural tourism development is viewed as a complex system in which social actors, digital tools, and cultural norms continuously interact (Senge, 1990; Bramwell et al., 2017). Within this system, Creative Leadership plays a critical role by fostering participation, trust, and adaptive innovation in uncertain and decentralized contexts (Amabile, 1996; Rickards & Moger, 2006).

Extant literature highlights that sustainable tourism development emerges from the interplay of leadership, social media, and stakeholder participation. Creative leadership facilitates collaboration and co-creation, while social media functions as a platform for digital storytelling and value co-creation, shaping tourists' perceptions of sustainability (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Xiang et al., 2017; Filieri et al., 2021; UNWTO, 2022). In line with Service-Dominant Logic, tourists are viewed as active participants in value creation, contributing to experiential and sustainability-oriented tourism (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Pine & Gilmore, 2011). However, while prior studies emphasise leadership and digital technologies, they often overlook the behavioural mechanisms through which sustainability is embedded in community practices.

In rural contexts, the effectiveness of leadership and digital engagement depends on deeper cultural adaptation. This study adopts cultural change theory, viewing sustainability as embedded in shared norms and everyday practices (Schein, 2010). Cultural change is thus positioned as a key mechanism through which leadership and digital engagement translate into sustained behavioural outcomes. Compared to constructs such as social capital or institutional support, cultural change more directly captures the internalisation of sustainability that ensures long-term continuity.

Despite these advancements, existing research has largely focused on internal stakeholders, with limited attention to the tourist perspective. This represents a critical gap, as tourists—although external actors—can perceive

leadership and cultural transformation through observable indicators such as participation, authenticity, environmental practices, and digital narratives.

Accordingly, this study proposes an integrated framework in which creative leadership influences green destination development both directly and indirectly through social media utilisation and cultural change. By addressing these gaps, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of sustainable tourism development in rural communities.

Conceptual Framework

This study conceptualizes green destination development as a co-evolutionary process emerging from the interaction of leadership, digital engagement, and shared cultural values. To overcome fragmented perspectives, it synthesizes Systems Theory, Creative Leadership Theory, and Service-Dominant Logic into a coherent middle-range framework, viewing sustainability as an outcome of interconnected social, digital, and cultural dynamics rather than a linear process. From a systems perspective, rural destinations operate as complex adaptive systems in which actors, technologies, and norms are interdependent. Creative leadership enables system transformation through participatory governance and innovation, while Service-Dominant Logic positions tourists as active co-creators of value. Together, these perspectives explain how leadership activates interaction, digital platforms mediate engagement, and co-creation reinforces sustainability-oriented behaviors.

Within this framework, social media functions as a key mechanism linking leadership and tourist perception. Drawing on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), tourists process sustainability narratives through both central (cognitive evaluation) and peripheral (emotional and symbolic cues) routes. This dual-processing perspective strengthens the construct of social media utilization by capturing both rational and affective dimensions of perception. This dual-route

processing mechanism explains how social media utilization influences both cognitive evaluation and affective perception, thereby strengthening its direct and indirect effects within the structural model.

To ensure conceptual clarity, this study distinguishes creative leadership as an upstream, intentional process from cultural change as a downstream, internalized process embedded in shared norms and practices. This distinction reduces construct overlap and strengthens the explanatory validity of the model. Collectively, the framework advances a middle-range theoretical explanation linking leadership, digital mediation, and cultural internalization to sustainable tourism outcomes.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

Green destination development is conceptualized as the outcome of interactions among creative leadership, social media utilization, and cultural change. Creative leadership fosters collaboration and sustainability strategies, while social media enhances engagement and value co-creation. Cultural change serves as a key mediating mechanism that translates these influences into sustained sustainability practices.

Accordingly, the study proposes: H1—Creative Leadership positively influences Green Destination Development; H2—Social Media Utilization positively influences Green Destination Development; and H3—Cultural Change mediates these relationships.

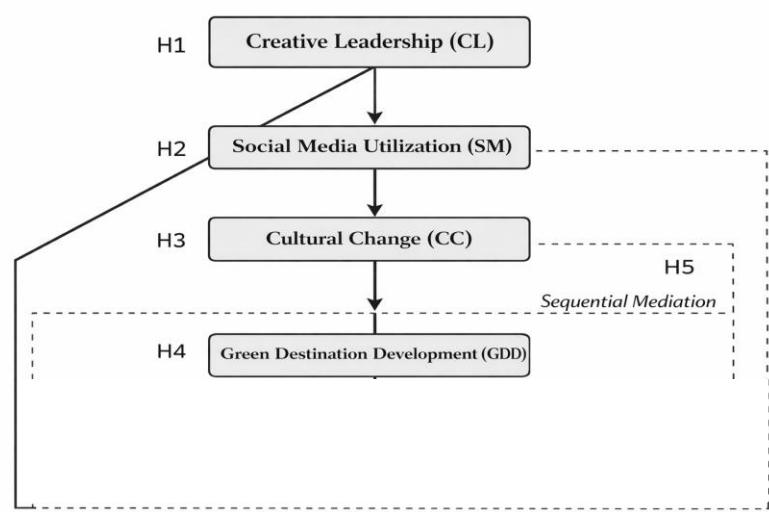


Figure 1 Integrated conceptual framework of green destination development.

The framework illustrates the hypothesized relationships among creative leadership, social media utilization, cultural change, and green destination development, including both direct and sequential mediating effects.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods design to examine the relationships among creative leadership, social media utilization, cultural change, and green destination development in rural communities in Lower Northern Thailand. The approach integrates quantitative and qualitative methods to capture both structural relationships and underlying contextual mechanisms.

In the quantitative phase, a cross-sectional survey of 400 tourists was conducted using stratified random sampling based on provincial location (Tak, Phitsanulok, Sukhothai, and Uttaradit) to ensure representativeness. A structured questionnaire was developed from established scales. Content validity was confirmed through expert evaluation (CVI = 0.80–1.00), and reliability was supported by Cronbach’s Alpha values exceeding 0.70. Construct validity was

verified using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Data were analysed باستخدام Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to assess direct and mediating effects, with model fit and explanatory power (R^2) evaluated using standard indices.

In the qualitative phase, 40 key informants were purposively selected, including community leaders and tourism practitioners. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns related to leadership, digital engagement, cultural change, and sustainability practices.

Methodological triangulation was applied using a complementarity approach, where qualitative findings were used to explain and contextualise the SEM results, particularly the mediating role of cultural change. This integration enhances both the validity and practical relevance of the study.

Results

The results of the study are presented according to the research objectives as follows.

For Objective 1, the results indicate that Creative Leadership ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < .001$) and Social Media Utilization ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < .001$) have significant positive direct effects on green destination development.

For Objective 2, Cultural Change is identified as a partial mediator, with significant indirect effects from Creative Leadership ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < .001$) and Social Media Utilization ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < .001$), while the direct effects remain significant.

For Objective 3, the structural model testing shows that all hypotheses are supported ($p < .001$), and the model explains 62% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.62$) in green destination development, indicating strong explanatory power.

These findings are presented in Tables 1,2 and Figure 2

1) Direct and Indirect Effects on Green Destination Development

Table 1 Structural Path Effects on Green Destination Development

Structural Path	Direct Effect (β)	Indirect Effect through Cultural Change (β)	Total Effect (β)	Mediation Assessment
CL $\rightarrow$ GDD	0.31***	0.22***	0.53***	Partial mediation
SM $\rightarrow$ GDD	0.27***	0.19***	0.46***	Partial mediation
CC $\rightarrow$ GDD	0.35***	–	0.35***	–

*** $p < .001$

The results indicate that all variables significantly influence green destination development ($p < .001$), with Cultural Change demonstrating the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.35$). Creative Leadership and Social Media Utilization show both direct and indirect effects, confirming partial mediation through cultural transformation.

2) The Mediating Role of Cultural Change

Cultural Change serves as a key mediator linking Creative Leadership and Social Media Utilization to green destination development. The SEM results confirm partial mediation through significant direct and indirect effects, indicating that sustainability outcomes are achieved both directly and through cultural transformation. Qualitative findings further support its role in fostering shared values and long-term sustainability. Table 2 confirms the strength of these relationships, as depicted in the structural model presented in Figure 2.

Table 2 Structural Model Results and Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Path	β	p-value	Result
H1	CL $\rightarrow$ GDD	0.31	$< .001$	Supported
H2	SM $\rightarrow$ GDD	0.27	$< .001$	Supported
H3	CC $\rightarrow$ GDD	0.35	$< .001$	Supported
H4	SM $\rightarrow$ CC $\rightarrow$ GDD	0.19	$< .001$	Supported
H5	CL $\rightarrow$ CC $\rightarrow$ GDD	0.22	$< .001$	Supported

All hypothesized relationships are supported ($p < .001$). Cultural Change has the strongest direct effect, with significant indirect effects confirming its key role as a partial mediator linking leadership and social media to green destination development.

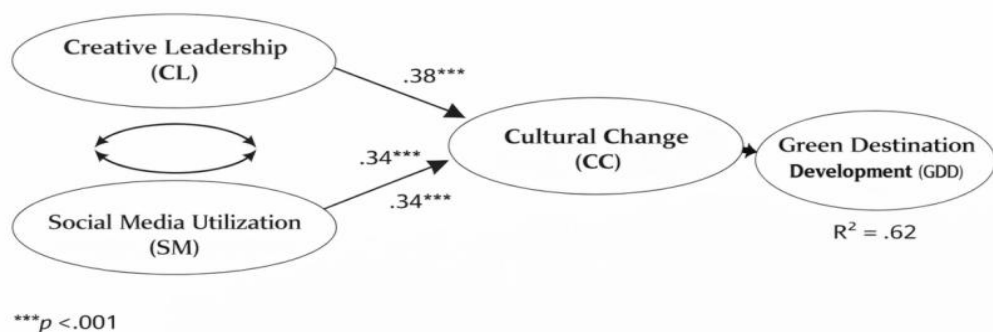


Figure 2 Structural equation model with standardized path coefficients

The figure shows that Creative Leadership and Social Media Utilization influence green destination development through Cultural Change as a key mediator ($\beta = .35$, $p < .001$), with strong explanatory power ($R^2 = .62$).

For Objective 4, the integrated findings from Table 3 and Figure 3 demonstrate that green destination development is shaped by the interaction of leadership, digital engagement, and cultural transformation, with Cultural Change showing the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.35$). These findings are presented in Table 3 and Figure 3

The findings indicate that green destination development is driven by the combined effects of creative leadership, social media use, and cultural change ($R^2 = .62$). Cultural Change serves as a key mediator, translating these factors into shared values and sustainable practices, while qualitative evidence highlights the role of local context in shaping these relationships.

Table 3 Alignment of Research Objectives with Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Research Objective	Key Findings from Quantitative Analysis	Supporting Qualitative Evidence
Objective 1	Descriptive analysis shows that Creative Leadership (Mean = 3.58), Social Media Utilization (Mean = 3.63), and Cultural Change (Mean = 3.67) are all perceived at a high level	Interviews confirm strong leadership practices, active digital engagement, and ongoing cultural adaptation in communities
Objective 2	SEM results indicate a significant direct effect of Creative Leadership on green destination development ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < .001$)	Leaders provide vision, participation, innovation support, and coordination for tourism activities (Themes 1 and 4)
Objective 3	Social Media Utilization shows a significant direct effect on green destination development ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < .001$) and contributes indirectly through cultural processes	Qualitative findings show that leadership strengthens social media use for engagement, coordination, and participation
Objective 4	Cultural Change has the strongest direct effect on green destination development ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < .001$)	Cultural adaptation, eco-values internalization, and innovation drive sustainable practices and visitor experiences

The results confirm that all research objectives were successfully achieved through the integration of quantitative and qualitative data. SEM findings show that creative leadership, social media use, and cultural change significantly influence green destination development, with Cultural Change as the strongest predictor. Qualitative evidence further explains the underlying mechanisms of these relationships.

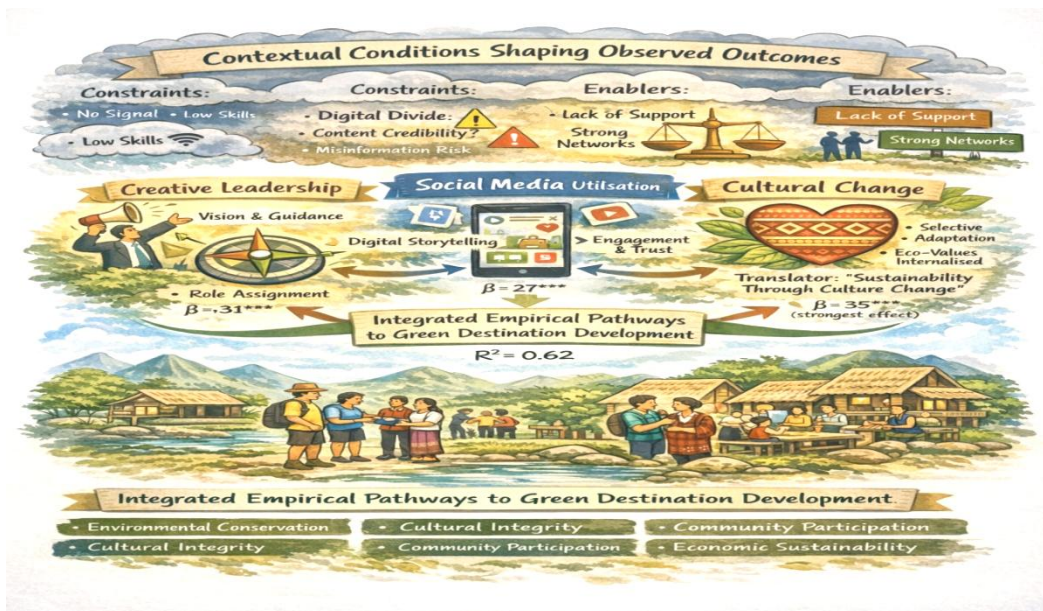


Figure 3 Integrated Empirical Synthesis of Green Destination Development

The figure illustrates the interaction of creative leadership, social media utilization, and cultural change in shaping green destination development, with Cultural Change as the key predictor and mediator. The integrated findings support a contextual model, indicating that sustainable development relies on the alignment of leadership, digital engagement, and cultural transformation.

Discussion

Effect Size Interpretation

Cultural Change shows the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.35$), suggesting that sustainability is more strongly reflected through community values and practices than through leadership structures. This indicates that bottom-up cultural processes are more perceptible than top-down mechanisms.

Mediation Discussion

The presence of partial mediation indicates that Creative Leadership and Social Media Utilization influence green destination development through both direct pathways (e.g., management and communication) and indirect pathways via cultural transformation.

R-Squared Discussion

Although the model explains a substantial proportion of variance ($R^2 = 0.62$), the remaining 38% suggests the influence of additional factors, such as government policy, infrastructure, and community capacity, which were not included in the model.

Integrated Discussion

The findings confirm that green destination development is a systemic and interactive process involving leadership, digital engagement, and cultural transformation. Figure 2 serves as the primary analytical model, while Figure 3 provides a practitioner-oriented synthesis.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that creative leadership and social media play crucial roles in developing sustainable green destinations in rural communities, with cultural change acting as a key mediating mechanism. The findings highlight that green destination development is a systemic process requiring the integration of leadership, digital participation, and sustainability-oriented cultural values. The study also extends the concept of creative leadership beyond organisational contexts and underscores the role of social media in advancing sustainable tourism.

New knowledge generated from this study

Demonstrating how creative leadership and social media utilisation are transformed into sustainable green destination development through the central mediating role of cultural change. The model synthesises quantitative SEM results and qualitative themes, highlighting cultural change as the structural mechanism that embeds sustainability values into everyday community practices.

Recommendations

Research Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to capture the dynamic evolution of sustainable green destination development over time. Expanding the research context to diverse geographical and cultural settings would enhance the generalisability of findings. Additionally, incorporating variables such as social capital, governance, and community capacity could provide a more comprehensive model.

Further research should also examine moderating factors, including infrastructure readiness and local collaboration, as well as explore the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in improving tourism management and governance. Finally, integrating participatory and qualitative approaches is recommended to better understand community dynamics, cultural processes, and local agency in sustainable tourism development.

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