

# Empowering Youth for Sustainable Tourism: The Mediating Roles of Social Innovation in Promoting Local Community Development

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*Received Date: 20 April 2025*

*Accepted Date: 1 May 2025*

*Published Date: 30 June 2025*

## **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the relationship between youth empowerment, social innovation, and community development in the context of sustainable tourism. As youth play a critical role in shaping the future of tourism, understanding how their empowerment influences local development is essential for fostering sustainable practices. The aim of the study is to examine how social innovation mediates the relationship between youth empowerment and community development, with a particular focus on the role of young people in promoting sustainable tourism. Using a narrative review methodology, the research synthesizes existing literature from the Scopus database to identify key themes and theoretical perspectives surrounding youth involvement in tourism, community development, and social innovation. The findings reveal that empowering youth leads to increased community participation and the development of innovative solutions that address local challenges. Social innovation plays a crucial role in mediating the effects of youth empowerment on community development by facilitating inclusive governance, capacity building, and the preservation of cultural and natural resources. The study contributes to both theoretical and practical discussions on youth involvement in sustainable tourism, highlighting the significance of inclusive governance and stakeholder collaboration. However, the study's limitations include its focus on specific geographic contexts, suggesting that further research is needed to explore cross-cultural dynamics and the long-term impacts of youth-led initiatives on community development.

**Keywords:** community development; social innovation; sustainable tourism; youth engagement; youth empowerment

## **INTRODUCTION**

Sustainable tourism is increasingly recognized as a critical strategy for fostering economic development while preserving cultural and environmental heritage. However, the success of sustainable tourism initiatives often hinges on the involvement of local communities, particularly youth. Empowering young people to engage actively in tourism development can lead to transformative change in the tourism sector and the broader context of community development. Youth bring fresh perspectives, innovative ideas, and a strong interest in leveraging digital technologies to promote sustainable practices. As a result, the role of youth in driving sustainable

tourism has gained significant attention in recent academic and policy discussions (Saputra & Kamilah, 2024; Schilling & Kastenholz, 2024). Nevertheless, the pathway from youth engagement to tangible community development remains complex and requires further exploration, particularly in how social innovation can mediate this relationship.

Existing literature highlights the growing significance of youth involvement in sustainable tourism, with studies highlighting the benefits of youth-led initiatives in preserving local cultures, promoting responsible travel, and stimulating innovative tourism practices (Partanen et al., 2023; Saputra & Kamilah, 2024). Social innovation, as a process that addresses local challenges by creating new social value and fostering community participation, is identified as a key driver of sustainable tourism development (Ciro et al., 2019; Rodríguez-Márquez et al., 2024). Through the lens of social innovation, youth engagement takes on a new dimension, where young people not only participate in existing structures but actively reshape them to better meet local needs and aspirations (Ciro et al., 2019). These initiatives have demonstrated positive outcomes in various global contexts, from revitalizing rural tourism economies to promoting eco-friendly tourism practices (Manaf et al., 2018; Pranita et al., 2022). However, the specific mechanisms through which social innovation mediates the relationship between youth engagement and local community development remain underexplored.

The problem at hand is the lack of a comprehensive framework that explains how youth engagement in social innovation processes leads to sustainable outcomes in local communities. While many studies emphasize the role of youth in tourism and the potential of social innovation, there is a need for a deeper understanding of how these elements interact and contribute to community development. Research to date has been fragmented, with few attempts to integrate youth involvement and social innovation into a cohesive theoretical framework. This gap in the literature limits our ability to design effective strategies for leveraging youth engagement to achieve sustainable tourism outcomes. Therefore, this study aims to propose a theoretical framework that outlines the mediating role of social innovation in promoting local community development through youth engagement.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform both academic research and practical tourism development strategies. By investigating how social innovation can facilitate the transition from youth engagement to community development, this research offers valuable insights for policymakers, tourism practitioners, and community leaders. The findings could contribute to the design of more effective youth-centered tourism initiatives, ensuring that local communities benefit economically from tourism and retain control over their cultural and environmental resources. Furthermore, this study aligns with the broader goals of sustainable development, particularly the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasize the significance of inclusive, community-driven growth.

This study adopts a social constructivist theoretical approach, which views social innovation as a process of collective action that emerges from the interactions among community members, institutions, and external stakeholders (Hassan & Zaabi, 2024). This approach highlights the importance of youth as active agents of change within their communities. By focusing on the mediating role of social innovation, the study draws upon theories of participatory development and empowerment, which emphasize the transformative potential of involving marginalized groups in decision-making processes (Rodríguez-Márquez et al., 2024). The theoretical framework proposed in this study builds upon these ideas, suggesting that social innovation can bridge youth engagement and local community development, fostering inclusive and sustainable outcomes.

The structure of this paper is as follows: the next section provides a comprehensive overview of the concepts of youth engagement, social innovation, and local community development, followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework and hypotheses. Next, the research methodology will be outlined, detailing the study's approach to data collection and analysis. The results will then be discussed, followed by an analysis of how social innovation mediates the relationship between youth involvement and community development. Finally, the paper will conclude with recommendations for future research and practical implications for policymakers and tourism developers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Youth engagement

Youth engagement plays a critical role in advancing sustainable tourism by empowering younger generations to contribute actively to community development. Schilling and Kastenholz (2024) highlighted that youth participation in co-creative tourism activities can drive progress toward SDGs, especially in small towns and rural areas. Young people bring fresh perspectives, innovative ideas, and energy to tourism planning and management, leading to more inclusive and dynamic development strategies. Their involvement helps preserve cultural heritage and build the necessary skillsets for future leaders in tourism. Additionally, youth engagement promotes a sense of ownership and responsibility toward sustainable practices, ensuring that the tourism industry can thrive in a way that aligns with both environmental and community goals (Partanen et al., 2023). By engaging in such activities, youth also gain valuable experience in leadership, project management, and communication, which are essential for their personal development.

Despite the clear benefits of youth involvement, challenges persist in effectively integrating them into tourism planning. These challenges often stem from a lack of experience and the absence of structured opportunities for youth to take on leadership roles in tourism. According to Saputra and Kamilah (2024), young leaders in ecotourism often face barriers such as limited access to resources and mentorship. This can hinder their ability to initiate or sustain impactful projects. Moreover, the societal perception that youth lack the necessary experience can create additional obstacles to their involvement in decision-making processes. Therefore, it is essential to create capacity-building opportunities and frameworks that support youth empowerment and enable them to navigate these challenges. By addressing these barriers, communities can unlock the full potential of their youth, making them integral agents of change in sustainable tourism development.

### Social innovation

Social innovation has emerged as a crucial mediating factor between youth engagement and local community development in the context of sustainable tourism. Rodríguez-Márquez et al., (2024) discussed how social innovation offers innovative approaches to tourism that focus on sustainability, inclusivity, and local development. It involves the development of novel solutions to community challenges, which are often led by or benefit young people. These innovations can include new business models, collaborative tourism experiences, or digital tools that promote sustainable practices. Social innovation addresses the pressing environmental and social issues that tourism can exacerbate and empowers local communities, especially youth, to take ownership of their development. By integrating young people's ideas into the tourism industry, social innovation ensures that tourism benefits are shared more equitably across the community, aligning economic development with social and environmental goals (Ciro et al., 2019).

Moreover, social innovation strengthens local identity and fosters a sense of community ownership, which is crucial for sustainable tourism. It enables communities to preserve their cultural and environmental resources while also providing new opportunities for economic growth. According to Sharma & Bhat (2023), social innovation is critical in bridging the gap between tourism development and local empowerment, as it emphasizes participatory decision-making. Through inclusive governance models, social innovation encourages local communities, including youth, to be active stakeholders in tourism planning and management. This process fosters collaboration among various sectors, ensuring that tourism development aligns with the community's values and needs. By facilitating greater community involvement, social innovation leads to more sustainable and resilient tourism systems that can withstand the challenges posed by climate change and other socio-economic pressures.

## Local community development

Local community development is a key goal of sustainable tourism, aiming to improve the social, economic, and environmental well-being of communities. Wani et al. (2024) emphasized that community empowerment is vital for promoting local support for sustainable tourism initiatives. When communities are empowered, they can actively contribute to the planning and decision-making processes that shape their future. In tourism, this empowerment fosters stronger local economies, better preservation of cultural heritage, and more effective management of natural resources. Furthermore, community-driven tourism models help mitigate the negative impacts of mass tourism, such as overcrowding and environmental degradation, by promoting responsible tourism practices. Through local ownership of tourism initiatives, communities are better able to ensure that tourism development is equitable, respects cultural traditions, and benefits the broader society (Rachmawati, 2020).

However, the process of community empowerment in tourism can be complex and filled with challenges. Cultural factors, political dynamics, and geographical isolation can limit the effectiveness of community-led tourism initiatives. As Rachmawati (2020) highlighted, certain communities may face resistance to empowerment strategies due to entrenched social structures or a lack of trust in tourism initiatives. Overcoming these barriers requires careful planning, capacity building, and a commitment to inclusive governance. As Varghese et al. (2024) noted, technological advancements and the rise of social entrepreneurship can provide opportunities for community empowerment, particularly in rural areas where traditional tourism infrastructure may be lacking. Technological tools, such as mobile platforms or digital marketing strategies, can help communities promote their tourism offerings while also addressing issues of accessibility and inclusion. By leveraging these opportunities, communities can overcome challenges and promote sustainable development that benefits all stakeholders.

In summary, the literature collectively highlights the interconnected roles of youth engagement, social innovation, and local community development in achieving sustainable tourism. Youth bring creativity and energy but face structural challenges that can be mitigated through targeted capacity building and inclusive participation frameworks. Social innovation acts as a bridge, enabling communities, especially young people, to create novel, sustainable tourism strategies that align with local values. Empowered communities, in turn, are more capable of driving tourism in ways that foster economic growth, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship. This integrated understanding of the literature provides a strong foundation for examining how these elements interact to support sustainable tourism development in specific local contexts.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research design: Narrative review methodology

The research design employed in this study is a narrative review methodology, which is often used to synthesize and critically analyze existing literature on a particular topic, offering a comprehensive understanding of the field of interest. Narrative reviews are particularly useful for exploring complex and multi-dimensional topics, such as the role of youth engagement, social innovation, and local community development in sustainable tourism. Unlike systematic reviews, which aim to answer specific research questions through a more rigid process, a narrative review provides a broader and more interpretive analysis of a range of studies. This methodology is well-suited for synthesizing diverse theoretical and empirical findings from various sources, as it allows the researcher to explore different perspectives, identify gaps in the literature, and propose new frameworks or insights.

In the context of this study, the narrative review methodology is applied to understand the complex relationships between youth engagement, social innovation, and local community development in the domain of sustainable tourism. The aim is to compile and synthesize findings from a wide range of academic literature, including journal articles, conference proceedings, and

reports, to establish a comprehensive overview of how social innovation mediates between youth engagement and local community development. The flexibility of the narrative review approach enables the researcher to engage in thematic exploration and to provide a coherent narrative that connects diverse sources of information. This method facilitates a holistic view of the research topic, which is particularly valuable for identifying new theoretical frameworks and theories related to sustainable tourism development.

### **Key steps in conducting a narrative review**

The process of conducting a narrative review begins with a systematic data collection phase, which is crucial for ensuring the review is comprehensive and grounded in relevant, high-quality literature. In this study, data collection is conducted through the Scopus database, a well-established and widely used database for academic research across various disciplines. Scopus is chosen for its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature, including journals, conference proceedings, and articles from a range of academic disciplines. This enables the researcher to access high-quality studies on youth engagement, social innovation, and community development, as well as their intersection within the context of sustainable tourism. The search is guided by well-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, ensuring that only relevant studies are included in the review.

To begin, a series of carefully constructed search terms is used to identify articles specifically addressing the topics of interest. These include terms such as "youth engagement," "social innovation," "sustainable tourism," "community development," and "empowerment," among others. The inclusion criteria for selecting studies include relevance to the research aim, empirical rigor, and methodological soundness. The studies are then examined for their findings, methodologies, and theoretical frameworks. The researcher also takes note of the publication date to ensure the inclusion of recent studies that may provide contemporary insights. Once the relevant articles are identified, they are read, analyzed, and synthesized according to common themes and key findings. This process allows the researcher to identify gaps, trends, and patterns in the literature that are crucial for developing a theoretical framework of how social innovation mediates the relationship between youth engagement and community development in sustainable tourism.

Using Scopus as the primary data source, the study ensures access to a large body of peer-reviewed and credible literature. The final outcome of this narrative review methodology is a detailed synthesis that captures the state of knowledge on the topic, offering insights into existing theories, challenges, and research gaps while contributing to developing a theoretical framework for understanding the mediating role of social innovation in sustainable tourism.

### **Data collection and review strategy**

In the data collection and review strategy, the process is designed to comprehensively gather, analyze, and synthesize relevant literature on the intersections of youth engagement, sustainable tourism, community development, and social innovation. To ensure the inclusion of high-quality and relevant research, a well-defined search string is employed in the Scopus database, which is a highly regarded resource for peer-reviewed academic articles. The search string used for this study is as follows: ("youth" OR "young people" OR "teenagers" OR "adolescents") AND ("sustainable tourism" OR "eco-tourism" OR "responsible tourism" OR "green tourism") AND ("community development" OR "local development" OR "social development" OR "community empowerment") AND ("empowerment" OR "engagement" OR "involvement" OR "participation").

This search string is carefully structured to capture a wide range of studies focusing on the main themes of youth, tourism, community development, and empowerment. The terms used in the search string are chosen to ensure inclusiveness and capture the extent of the literature. By combining multiple synonyms and related terms, the search is designed to retrieve a diverse set of articles that approach the topic from different angles. This includes youth participation in sustainable tourism, social innovation through community engagement, and the empowerment of young people in community development initiatives. This method ensures that the review covers a broad range

of research, making it possible to identify emerging trends, key theoretical frameworks, and gaps in the literature.

The data collection process involves narrowing down the search results through inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria are based on relevance to the study's objectives, with a focus on empirical studies, theoretical papers, and reviews that address youth engagement, sustainable tourism, and community development. Articles are also selected based on their methodological rigor, ensuring that studies with robust research designs are included. Exclusion criteria filter out studies that do not directly address the primary themes of the research or those that are of low quality or methodological rigor. After identifying the most relevant articles, they are thoroughly read, assessed, and organized according to common themes, theoretical perspectives, and research methodologies.

### Thematic analysis approach

To synthesize the findings from the collected literature, an integrative thematic analysis approach is employed. This approach is designed to identify, analyze, and integrate key themes and concepts that emerge across the various studies. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method that allows for examining patterns or themes within data, making it particularly useful in reviewing a broad range of studies across diverse disciplines. In this study, the thematic analysis serves to structure the synthesis of literature by focusing on the central themes related to youth engagement, social innovation, community development, and sustainable tourism.

The integrative nature of this thematic analysis approach allows for the synthesis of findings from different theoretical perspectives, methodologies, and contexts. This suggests that the literature is not only reviewed for its content but also its theoretical contributions, providing a rich understanding of the subject matter. Key themes such as the role of youth in sustainable tourism, the impact of community engagement on local development, and the ways in which social innovation fosters empowerment in the tourism sector are identified. Through this analysis, the review uncovers patterns and connections between various concepts, such as how social innovation serves as a mediating factor in the relationship between youth engagement and local community development. Additionally, the approach helps highlight any inconsistencies or contradictions within the literature, revealing areas that require further exploration.

Overall, this data collection and review strategy ensures a comprehensive and rigorous examination of the literature, providing a well-rounded understanding of how youth engagement, sustainable tourism, and community development intersect. The integrative thematic analysis approach helps identify key themes and concepts and provides the foundation for developing a theoretical framework that will guide future research and policy in this area.

### Key findings from the narrative review

In this section, the key findings from the narrative review are organized and presented in a table format to provide clarity on the main insights derived from the literature (see Table 1). These findings focus on critical aspects of empowering youth for sustainable tourism, with particular attention to the mediating role of social innovation and its implications for local community development.

Table 1. Key findings from the narrative review

Key finding	Description	Author, Year
Community involvement in tourism development	Different community groups, including marginalized voices, must be included in tourism planning and decision-making. This ensures a more inclusive approach to tourism development. Community involvement plays a critical role in sustainable tourism practices and creates equitable opportunities for all stakeholders, especially youth.	Partanen, M., Kettunen, M., & Saarinen, J. (2023)

Table 1. (continued)

Youth engagement in sustainable tourism	Engaging youth in co-creative tourism activities facilitates cultural preservation and skill development, both of which contribute to sustainable tourism. Youth engagement fosters the next generation of leaders who are capable of promoting sustainable development strategies and supporting local economies.	Schilling, C., & Kastenholz, E. (2024)
Social innovation as a mediator	Social innovation provides novel solutions that bridge the gap between youth empowerment and local community development. By addressing challenges such as cultural factors and resource limitations, social innovation enables youth to participate actively in shaping tourism policies and practices that benefit the community and environment.	Rodríguez-Márquez, R. L., Angulo-Rangel, F. A., & Ustate Pérez, M. (2024)
Capacity building for youth leadership	Young leaders in ecotourism face challenges such as limited experience and access to resources. Therefore, capacity building and continuous learning are essential to overcoming these barriers and preparing youth to take on leadership roles in sustainable tourism initiatives.	Saputra, F., & Kamilah, K. (2024)
Technological advancements in empowerment	The use of technology in community empowerment strategies enables better engagement of youth in sustainable tourism development. Technological interventions foster social entrepreneurship opportunities and provide rural communities with tools for effective tourism development.	Varghese, B., Joseph, E. K., Lakshmypriya, K., Kallarakal, T. K., & Mehta, H. (2024)
Cultural and contextual considerations	Cultural factors and political contexts can affect the effectiveness of community empowerment in tourism. In some regions, tourism development may face resistance due to cultural or geographical limitations, requiring more tailored strategies to ensure successful youth engagement and empowerment.	Rachmawati, E. (2020)
Inclusive governance for sustainable tourism	Inclusive governance and stakeholder collaboration are fundamental for sustainable tourism development. By involving all community members, including marginalized youth, in decision-making, tourism strategies can be more equitable and effective in promoting long-term sustainability.	Semwal, R., Tyagi, P., Tripathi, N., & Singh, A. (2024)
Community empowerment and local support	Community empowerment positively influences local support for sustainable tourism. When local communities are empowered, they are more likely to support and actively participate in tourism initiatives, which leads to greater success in sustainable tourism development.	Sharma, V., & Bhat, D. A. R. (2023); Wani, M. D., Dada, Z. A., & Shah, S. A. (2024)

The narrative review identifies several critical factors contributing to youth empowerment in sustainable tourism, with social innovation playing a pivotal role in mediating youth engagement and community development (Rodríguez-Márquez et al., 2024). Community involvement emerges as a foundational element for inclusive tourism development, ensuring all members, including marginalized groups, have a say in tourism planning and decision-making (Partanen et al., 2023). The review emphasizes that youth engagement in sustainable tourism activities fosters skill development and contributes to cultural preservation and the creation of sustainable development strategies (Schilling & Kastenholz, 2024). Additionally, social innovation is identified as a key mediator that helps bridge youth empowerment and local community development. By providing innovative solutions to social and environmental challenges, social innovation empowers youth to actively participate in sustainable tourism practices and policies (Rodríguez-Márquez et al., 2024).

The review also highlights several challenges and opportunities associated with empowering youth for sustainable tourism. Capacity building is essential to overcoming the challenges youth face, such as limited experience and resources, enabling them to take on leadership roles in ecotourism (Saputra & Kamilah, 2024). Furthermore, technological advancements are recognized as powerful tools for enhancing community empowerment and youth participation in sustainable tourism (Varghese et al., 2024). However, the review also highlights the significance of considering cultural and contextual factors, as these can significantly influence the effectiveness of empowerment strategies (Rachmawati, 2020). Finally, inclusive governance is critical for the success of sustainable tourism initiatives, as it ensures that all stakeholders, including youth, have

an equal voice in decision-making processes, fostering more equitable and sustainable outcomes (Semwal et al., 2024). Through these key findings, the review illustrates how social innovation and youth empowerment are central to fostering sustainable tourism development that benefits both the community and the environment.

### **Development of theoretical framework**

The development of the theoretical framework for this study is grounded in the need to understand the interplay between youth empowerment, social innovation, and sustainable tourism. In recent years, scholars have acknowledged the significant role that social innovation plays in fostering youth participation and leadership in sustainable tourism initiatives. Social innovation refers to novel solutions that address social needs and challenges through collaborative, community-driven efforts (Ciro et al., 2019). The theoretical framework will integrate concepts of youth engagement, empowerment, and social innovation, considering how these elements converge to promote local community development in the context of sustainable tourism. The framework will focus on the mediating role of social innovation in fostering youth participation in sustainable tourism practices. This, ultimately, contributes to community empowerment and sustainable development.

### **Application of the theory in the context of the study**

The application of the theoretical framework in this study will focus on how youth empowerment, supported by social innovation, can foster sustainable tourism development. Empowered youth, when involved in sustainable tourism initiatives, can play a transformative role in shaping tourism strategies that align with environmental, economic, and social sustainability goals. Drawing on existing theories of empowerment (Schilling & Kastenholz, 2024), this framework will explore how social innovation acts as a mediator between youth engagement and local community development. Social innovation encourages youth to develop creative solutions that address community challenges, such as environmental degradation and cultural preservation, while simultaneously enhancing the local tourism experience (Partanen, Kettunen, & Saarinen, 2023). By providing a space for youth to contribute to sustainable tourism planning and decision-making, social innovation nurtures a more inclusive and participatory approach to tourism development, which can drive both social change and local empowerment.

### **Conceptualization of the framework**

The conceptualization of the framework is structured around key concepts of youth empowerment, social innovation, and community development. First, the framework incorporates the concept of youth empowerment, which focuses on enabling young people to participate actively in decision-making processes, particularly in sustainable tourism initiatives (Rodríguez-Márquez et al., 2024). The second concept, social innovation, is central to the framework as it provides the tools and strategies that facilitate youth engagement and support local development initiatives (Ciro et al., 2019). Lastly, community development is included as the outcome of the effective application of these two concepts, with an emphasis on promoting local support for sustainable tourism and ensuring long-term community resilience. The relationship between these concepts will be explored through the theoretical lens of social capital and participatory governance, where youth, as active participants, help shape the social and economic fabric of their communities (Varghese et al., 2024).

### **Theoretical insights and literature integration**

This theoretical framework is built upon several key theoretical insights that have emerged from the literature on youth empowerment, social innovation, and community development. First, the social capital theory suggests that networks of relationships, particularly among youth and community members, enhance collective action and resource sharing, which are essential for sustainable tourism development (Sharma & Bhat, 2023). Second, the participatory governance



theory highlights the importance of involving diverse stakeholders, including youth, in the decision-making processes that affect local communities and tourism development (Semwal et al., 2024). Finally, social innovation theory emphasizes the role of innovative solutions in addressing complex social issues, such as environmental sustainability and economic inclusion, by enabling marginalized groups, including youth, to engage in transformative actions (Rodríguez-Márquez et al., 2024). The integration of these theoretical perspectives provides a comprehensive understanding of how social innovation can mediate the relationship between youth empowerment and sustainable community development.

### Practical implications and application

The practical implications of this theoretical framework are vast. In the context of sustainable tourism, the framework offers insights into how to design programs that promote youth engagement and leadership. Policymakers, tourism developers, and community leaders can use this framework to create opportunities for youth to actively participate in tourism planning and management. This ensures that their voices are heard in decisions related to environmental conservation, cultural heritage preservation, and economic development (Schilling & Kastenholz, 2024). The framework also emphasizes the significance of capacity building, technological innovation, and community collaboration in empowering youth and fostering social change. By applying these principles, communities can strengthen their resilience, improve tourism practices, and enhance social inclusion.

Therefore, the theoretical framework developed in this study provides a robust foundation for understanding how youth empowerment and social innovation can foster sustainable tourism development (see Figure 1). By integrating concepts from social capital theory, participatory governance, and social innovation, the framework highlights the critical role of youth in shaping the future of sustainable tourism. The insights gained from this framework can inform both theoretical discourse and practical strategies for promoting community-led sustainable tourism initiatives that are inclusive, innovative, and locally empowering. Ultimately, this framework serves as a guide for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars seeking to understand and leverage the potential of youth in driving sustainable tourism and local development.

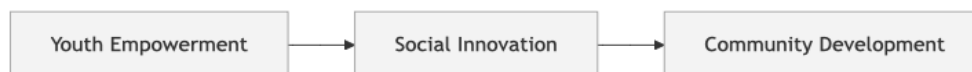


Figure 1. Proposed theoretical framework

### Proposition development

#### ***Proposition development: Youth empowerment and community development***

Youth empowerment plays a significant role in promoting community development, especially in the context of sustainable tourism. When empowered, youth gain the confidence, skills, and knowledge necessary to actively participate in local initiatives, including tourism planning and management (Schilling & Kastenholz, 2024). Empowered youth can drive social innovation, creating novel solutions to address challenges faced by their communities, stimulating local development, and enhancing the community's well-being (Partanen et al., 2023). By involving youth in decision-making processes and fostering leadership, communities can benefit from their fresh perspectives and innovative ideas, leading to more inclusive and sustainable growth (Ciro et al., 2019). Additionally, youth empowerment strengthens local identity, enhances social cohesion, and creates a sense of shared responsibility, which are crucial elements for sustainable development (Rodríguez-Márquez et al., 2024). Therefore, we propose that youth empowerment positively influences community development, as the skills and leadership gained through empowerment

initiatives contribute to the overall growth and resilience of the community. This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition statement: Empowering youth through active participation in sustainable tourism and community development initiatives positively impacts community development.

***Proposition development: Youth empowerment and social innovation***

Youth empowerment plays a crucial role in fostering social innovation, particularly in the context of sustainable tourism. Empowered youth are more likely to engage in creative problem-solving and contribute to developing novel solutions to societal challenges, thus driving social innovation (Partanen et al., 2023). Youth involvement in decision-making processes encourages the generation of fresh perspectives, which are vital for addressing the pressing issues within local communities and tourism sectors (Schilling & Kastenholtz, 2024). By equipping youth with the skills and confidence to act as agents of change, communities can benefit from their innovative contributions in areas such as community development, environmental sustainability, and cultural preservation (Rodríguez-Márquez et al., 2024). Additionally, youth empowerment initiatives provide the necessary tools for young people to engage with and influence local tourism management, ultimately facilitating the development of more inclusive, sustainable, and socially innovative strategies (Ciro et al., 2019). Therefore, we propose that empowering youth significantly contributes to social innovation by equipping them with the capabilities to identify and address community needs through innovative approaches. This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition statement: Empowering youth positively influences social innovation.

***Proposition development: Social innovation and community development***

Social innovation is crucial in promoting community development by providing new, sustainable solutions to societal challenges. In the context of sustainable tourism, social innovation fosters community empowerment by encouraging inclusive governance and participatory decision-making (Ciro et al., 2019). By integrating local knowledge, resources, and needs, social innovation facilitates the creation of tailored solutions that strengthen the social fabric of communities while also contributing to sustainable economic and environmental practices (Rodríguez-Márquez et al., 2024). Furthermore, social innovation enhances local identity and pride, encouraging community members to actively engage in development initiatives (Partanen et al., 2023). This collaborative approach not only improves the economic conditions of a community but also enhances its social cohesion, making it more resilient in the face of future challenges (Wani, Dada, & Shah, 2024). Therefore, we propose that social innovation has a significant positive impact on community development by fostering collaborative solutions that address local needs and promote sustainable growth. This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition statement: Social innovation positively affects community development.

***Proposition development: The relationship of youth empowerment and community development by social innovation***

Youth empowerment plays a critical role in the sustainable development of communities, and its influence is amplified through the mediation of social innovation. Social innovation provides a platform for young people to actively engage in solving community challenges, thus promoting inclusive growth and sustainable tourism (Partanen et al., 2023). When youth are empowered, they bring fresh perspectives and energy to community development projects, which enhances the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of local development (Rodríguez-Márquez et al., 2024). Social innovation facilitates this process by creating opportunities for youth to contribute to decision-making, collaborate with other stakeholders, and implement innovative solutions that

address the unique needs of their communities (Ciro et al., 2019). In turn, this dynamic interaction strengthens social cohesion, fosters a sense of belonging, and helps create sustainable pathways for long-term community development (Wani et al., 2024). Thus, we propose that youth empowerment, through the mediation of social innovation, significantly enhances community development by fostering active participation and innovative solutions tailored to local needs. This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition statement: Youth empowerment, facilitated by social innovation, positively influences community development.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study highlights the crucial role of youth empowerment in promoting community development, with social innovation acting as a vital mediator in this relationship. The key findings suggest that when youth are empowered, they actively contribute to sustainable development, fostering both community participation and innovative solutions to local challenges. Theoretical implications include the expansion of existing frameworks on youth engagement and sustainable tourism, as well as the integration of social innovation as a mediating factor in development processes. Practically, this study emphasizes the need for inclusive governance and capacity-building initiatives that can harness the potential of youth in community development. However, the study is limited by its focus on specific contexts and may not fully account for the diversity of cultural and socio-economic factors that influence youth empowerment. Additionally, the use of cross-sectional data restricts insights into long-term causal relationships between empowerment, innovation, and development outcomes. Hence, future research could explore cross-cultural comparisons to assess the generalizability of these findings, investigate the long-term impact of youth-led initiatives on community development, and examine the role of emerging technologies, such as digital platforms, social media, and Artificial Intelligence (AI), in enhancing youth participation in sustainable tourism and social innovation. Furthermore, longitudinal studies and participatory action research could offer deeper insights into how youth empowerment evolves over time and how it influences sustained community transformation. In addition, expanding the research scope to include marginalized or underrepresented youth populations may also provide a more holistic understanding of empowerment dynamics.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Kedah branch, Campus Sungai Petani for providing the necessary support throughout the course of this research. The institutional facilities and conducive research environment greatly contributed to the successful completion of this work.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Noorlailahusna Mohd Yusof wrote and revised the article. Intan Syahriza Azizan, Nor Ardyanti Ahmad, Junaida Ismail, and Siti Norfazlina Yusoff conceptualised the central research idea.

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