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## Research Article

### Factors influencing sustainable tourism economic growth: A case study of Lampang Province, Thailand

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## Abstract

This study investigates the factors that influence sustainable economic growth caused by Community-Based Tourism (CBT). Two communities in Lampang province, where the success in applying the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) to CBT is evident, are studied. A total of 377 questionnaires were used to obtain the data. The Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach was employed to test the hypotheses. The results of the testing of the measurement model and structural model indicate their reliability. Data analysis indicated that entrepreneurial skills fully mediate the relationship between SEP and sustainable economic growth. This finding holds managerial implications for other communities with similar contexts. Related agencies should enhance the communities' entrepreneurial skills based on the SEP. This could serve as a driving mechanism toward sustainable economic growth based on the philosophy of sufficiency economy.

## Introduction

The tourism industry is one of the key sectors for economic growth. Sustainable tourism can maintain the balance between economic development and environmental protection (Doncheva, 2019). Due to the steady increase in the popularity of ecotourism and the return to traditional lifestyles of the people, government agencies have put serious efforts into promoting CBT with the aim of making it a tool for boosting grassroots economic growth (Chatkaewnapanon and Lee, 2022). In rural areas, in particular, this new trend of tourism has replaced mass tourism as it is considered a proper option for sustainable tourism. CBT, therefore, if properly developed/managed, can be the solution to poverty as it gives the community the authority and power to manage their own economic activities, to make the most of their resources (Dodds et al., 2018). This concept has been clearly stated in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Dolezal and Novelli, 2022). In Thailand, the government has released a 4-year operating plan (2018–2022) for pushing forward the sustainable development of CBT (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2018). The plan targets the development of human resources so that they are capable of managing CBT sustainably and effectively. The 2016–2022 strategic plan for CBT tourism, known as CBT Thailand, mainly focuses on individual communities so that the market share from tourism goes to grassroots people. The plan does not intend to increase the number of tourists or to increase overall income but to use CBT as a tool for the sustainable development of the local community.

Tourism represents a viable alternative for economic activities in rural areas and improves the living standards of the communities (Muresan et al., 2019). To make tourism actually beneficial to the community, it is vital that residents of the community take part in tourism management from the beginning. Tourism management not only responds to changes in tourist tastes but also responds to the sustainability of the natural resources, the society, and the culture. There have been attempts to promote the community potential regarding tourism management entrepreneurial skills, hospitality, the adding value to community resources, being vigilant of tourism business opportunities, obstacles, and difficulties. All of this is to make tourism an additional source of income that can complement the existing way of life within each community.

Sustainability is considered one of the main elements to consider first for everyone who wants to start a tourism business (Marchi et al., 2022). Apart from economic growth, success in CBT will bring several other benefits to the community, such as job opportunities and infrastructure development. Nature-friendly tourism will also lead to the preservation and reform of community resources, as well as an improvement in the quality of living for the community (Untong and Phaokrueng, 2021). Several previous studies have identified key factors and obstacles to success in CBT. These studies suggest that the statistical relationship between those factors be studied so that the influence level of those factors can be determined (Zielinski et al., 2020). Thus, the researcher was interested in determining the influencing factors on sustainable tourism economic growth. Knowledge of these influencing factors can be applied to CBT.

Lampang, a city in northern Thailand, retains its old-town charm with ancient architectural buildings in its historic commercial district and culturally significant Lanna-style temples. Beyond the city, numerous natural attractions await visitors. In 2022, Lampang Province experienced a 166.75 percent increase in tourism income, and in 2023, it welcomed 1,667,803 tourists, generating a total income of 5,368 million baht. Given the province's tourism potential, this study explores the factors influencing the success of community-based tourism (CBT) in two notable Lampang communities: the historic Tha Ma-O community in Muang District and the nature-centric Pa Miang community in Muang Pan District. Understanding these factors is essential for promoting sustainable tourism in these areas.

## Literature Review

The concept of sustainable tourism, proposed by the World Conservation Union organization in 1996, entails environmentally responsible travel and visitation to natural areas in order to enjoy and appreciate nature, including cultural aspects, in a way that promotes conservation, has a low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples. Sustainable tourism is a process whereby balances should be struck between the environment, economy, and community issues, and it is up to the community to decide where the balance should lie (Hardy et al., 2002). The International Ecotourism Society proposed three key components of Sustainable tourism in 2004: (1) Environmentally, the activity has a low impact on natural resources, particularly in protected areas. It minimizes damage to the environment and ideally tries to benefit the environment; (2) Socially and culturally, the activity does not harm the social structure or culture of the community where it is located. Instead, it respects local cultures and traditions. It involves stakeholders (individuals, communities, tour operators, government institutions) in all phases of planning, development, and monitoring, and educates stakeholders about their roles; and (3) Economically, it contributes to the economic well-being of the community, generating sustainable and equitable income for local communities and as many other stakeholders as possible. It benefits owners, employees and neighbors. A tourism enterprise that meets these three principles will “do well by doing good”. This means running a tourism business in such a way that it does not destroy natural, cultural, or economic resources, but rather encourages an appreciation of the very resources that tourism is dependent on. It suggests that by pursuing sustainable practices, the tourism enterprise can simultaneously achieve both financial success and societal/environmental benefits.

There have been many studies on sustainable tourism development. Mai et al. (2020) state that seven factors are affecting sustainable tourism development in Vietnam. Specifically, social engagement has the strongest effect on sustainable tourism development, followed by state managerial competence, tourism service quality, the quality of tourism human resources, infrastructure development, material tourism facilities, and tourism resources. Palacios-Florencio et al. (2021) determined the factors contributing to sustainable tourism development. Among the Positive Impacts factors are the attitude towards the development of sustainable tourism, the perception of service quality, and motivation. According to the structural model provided by their analysis, tourists’ perception of service quality positively impacts sustainable tourism development, along with the satisfaction experienced from tourism consumption.

Based on the theories of sustainable development and a literature review, the authors synthesize the factors of community capital, collaboration networks, entrepreneurial skills, and the sufficiency economy philosophy as attributes with a potential influence on sustainable tourism development, more specifically, sustainable economic growth in tourism.

#### *The Relation between Community Capital (CC) and Sustainable Economic Growth (SEG)*

Tourism resources can be referred to as tourist attractions; both attractions and resources are natural or cultural goods and have the capacity to inspire visits (Navarro, 2015). Tourism resources are vital components of the tourism industry. These resources, whether natural or man-made, tangible or intangible, encompass ancient communities, sanctuaries, temples, cultures, ways of life, museums, folk wisdom, dialects, crafts, etc. Community capital in this paper refers to tourism resources (natural and cultural) and their management, such as infrastructure or tourism facilities (physical), the involvement of the community in tourism activities (social), and access to sources of funding for tourism activities of local communities (financial). When tourism resource management is one of the important components in the tourism, community capital has a positive effect on sustainable economic growth. Therefore, the following model hypothesis is formulated:

H1. Community capital has a positive effect on sustainable economic growth.

#### *The Relation between Entrepreneurial Skills (ES) and Sustainable Economic Growth (SEG)*

Entrepreneurial skills have a positive effect on sustainable tourism economic growth, as the tourism entrepreneur is a crucial factor in tourism resource management, especially concerning managerial capacities. The skills and spirit required of an entrepreneur are thus the driving force behind the success of tourism. The entrepreneurial skills are fundamental to human capital development, serving as an internal drive to strengthen core competencies necessary for success in entrepreneurship. This set of skills and thinking aids entrepreneurs in overcoming economic, social, and technological challenges. Entrepreneurial skills that enable success in the global and digital world include the ability to: (1) Focus and embrace novelty: fostering creativity and innovation, demonstrating initiative, self-efficacy, and resilience; (2) Generate solutions to emerging problems: engaging in strategic planning, evaluation, problem resolution, decision-making, and transformational leadership; and (3) Communicate effectively: employing clear and visual communication, fostering teamwork and networking,

and mastering digital communication (Jardim, 2021). Therefore, the following model hypothesis is formulated:

H2. Entrepreneurial skills have a positive effect on sustainable economic growth.

*The Relation between Community Capital (CC) and Entrepreneurial Skills (ES)*

Entrepreneur refers to any person who manages various resources to benefit the organization (Kittimetheelkul, 2020). The role of a tourism entrepreneur encompasses developing products and services. They conceptualize, design, and develop tourism products and services that cater to the needs and preferences of travelers. This could include anything from eco-tourism adventures to luxury accommodations or unique cultural experiences. Therefore, the availability of tourism resources (community capital) will help tourism entrepreneurs achieve higher levels of economic productivity. The following model hypothesis is formulated:

H3: Community capital positively influences entrepreneurial skills.

*The Relation between Collaboration Network (CN) and Entrepreneurial Skills (ES)*

Collaboration network is a factor that can affect entrepreneurial skills, particularly in regard to the involvement of the community in tourism activities. This network, which involves collaboration among various stakeholders including public, private, and civil society (Kanburom and Jittaruttha, 2022), is essential for sustainable tourism. By involving all parties in decision-making processes, planning, and implementation, destinations can ensure that the needs and concerns of all stakeholders are considered. This collaboration focuses on building and developing mechanisms for tourism management that enable integrated tourism activities, reducing redundancy, and increasing participation in all stages, from planning to knowledge-sharing (Nuancha and Ayuthya, 2020), and the development of innovative solutions for sustainable tourism. Stakeholder collaboration is acknowledged as an important aspect of tourism destination planning and management. This collaboration embraces participative processes recognized as core principles of sustainable development (Saito and Ruhanen, 2017). Stakeholder collaboration reflects their involvement in tourism development; stakeholder consultations will craft measures on how best to approach tourism development (Charleen et al., 2014). Stakeholder collaborations, involving the private sector, civil society, local communities, among others, in tourism destination planning and management contribute to the

development of government policies and regulations for sustainable tourism. These policies encompass environmentally and socially responsible tourism practices, waste management, protection of natural resources, and provision of financial incentives for sustainable tourism initiatives (Alotaibi, 2024). The response of tourism entrepreneurs to policies, strategies, and tourism promotion measures will enable them to manage their tourism businesses to ensure the long-term viability and positive impact of sustainable tourism.

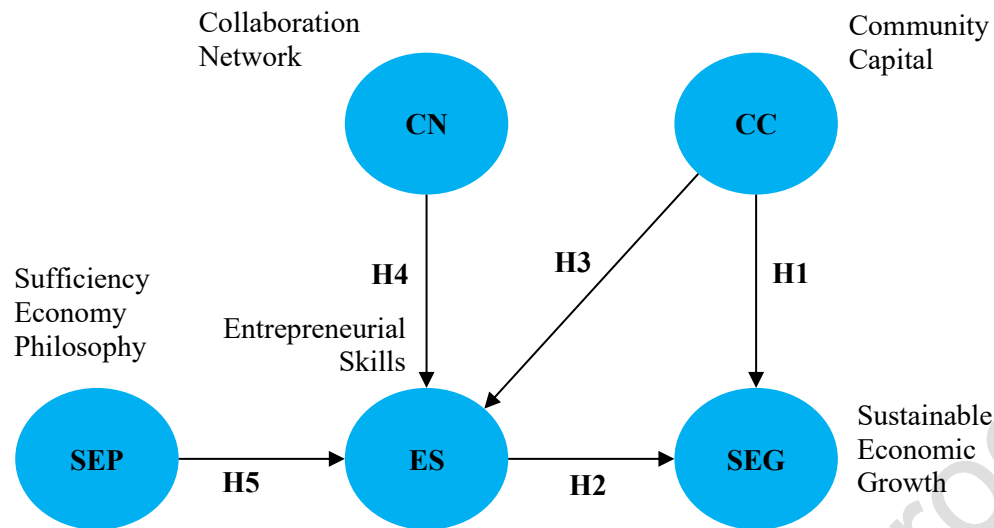
H4: Collaboration network positively influences entrepreneurial skills.

#### *The Relation between Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) and Entrepreneurial Skills (ES)*

The assessed relationship between the application of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy and business success in Thai tourism businesses has shown that the higher the level at which the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy is applied, the higher the level of business success (Chartrungruang, 2020). The Sufficiency Economy Philosophy comprises three components and two underlying conditions. Sufficiency entails three components: moderation, reasonableness, and the requirement for a self-immunity system, i.e., the ability to cope with shocks from internal and external changes. Two underlying conditions necessary to achieve sufficiency are knowledge and morality (Jeerat et al., 2023; Wongkumchai et al., 2020). The Sufficiency Economy Philosophy necessitates breadth and thoroughness in planning, careful application of knowledge, and implementation of those plans. In tourism, the entrepreneur is the individual who will apply the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy. Therefore, the following model hypothesis is formulated:

H5: Sufficiency economy philosophy positively influences entrepreneurial skills.

Based on the hypotheses development provided above, the research framework is presented as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** The research framework

## Methodology

The data were collected from people living in two communities, both of which are outstanding in driving community tourism work that leads to economic development in Lampang Province, namely, (1) Tha Ma-O is a community that is outstanding in cultural tourism and historical sites, and (2) Pa Miang is a community that is outstanding in nature tourism and agricultural lifestyle. This study used accidental sampling. The sample included a total of 337 people living in the two communities (205 from Tha Ma-O and 132 from Pa Miang) who received the questionnaires. All variables were measured on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 where 1 = totally disagree and 5 = totally agree. The variables and items in the questionnaire were presented as shown in Table 1.



**Table 1** Factors and items that influence the growth of sustainable tourism economy

Factors/ items	Description
Community capital (CC)	
CC1: Social capital	The involvement of the community in tourism activities.
CC2: Natural capital	Land, water, forests, air, mountains, etc., have high potential to attract tourists.
CC3: Physical capital	The infrastructure or tourism facilities.
CC4: Financial capital	The availability of funds to be spent on tourism management.
CC5: Cultural capital	Culture, ancient sites, wisdom, and ways of life all have the potential to attract tourists.
Collaboration network (CN)	
CN1: Public sector	Policies, regulations, and the organization of government-sponsored tourism activities support tourism.
CN2: Private sector	Various forms of assistance from the private sector, such as bank funding support and advertising of tourism activities, contribute to tourism. Collaboration among groups of tourism entrepreneurs.
CN3: Civil society sector	
Entrepreneurial skills (ES)	
ES1: Focus and open to novelty	Creativity, innovation, and flexibility.
ES2: Create solutions to emerging problems	Strategic planning and evaluation, problem solving and decision making, and the leadership for change.
ES3: Communicate effectively	Clear digital communication, team working, and network building.
Sufficiency economy philosophy (SEP)	
SEP1: Moderation	The community applies the three principles of SEP, which are moderation, reasonableness, and self-immunity, along with a mindset of morally applying knowledge, as they work together to analyze and find ways to deal with problems.
SEP2: Reasonableness	
SEP3: Self-immunity	
SEP4: Knowledge	
SEP5: Integrity	
Sustainable economic growth (SEG)	
SEG1: Income	Creating sufficient income to support the community continuously.
SEG2: Nature balance	Tourism management that does not impact the environment.
SEG3: Culture, way of life and wisdom	Tourism management that preserves the way of life of the community.
SEG4: Benefits	Sharing tourism benefits fairly and for the public's benefit.

The created questionnaire underwent a trial to assess the reliability of the tool. The results were analyzed to find the Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient, which checks the internal

consistency of the questionnaire responses. The coefficient should have a reliability value for the entire questionnaire of not less than 0.70, meeting the criteria. Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed for data analysis to scrutinize the hypothesis. The questionnaires were distributed in two communities, and 337 completed surveys were collected. Conducting a *t*-test to compare the average scores from the two communities revealed no significant differences in the samples at a significance level of 0.05.

For the measurement model, SmartPLS was utilized to evaluate its convergent and discriminant validity. Regarding convergent validity, each indicator should have a factor loading greater than 0.7, while the average variance extracted (AVE) for each factor should exceed 0.5. Additionally, the composite reliability (CR) should surpass 0.7, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient should be higher than 0.7, indicating acceptable convergent validity of the measurement model (Chin, 2010; Hair et al., 2011). Furthermore, each associated indicator should possess a loading higher than 0.6, and both CR and Cronbach's alpha coefficient for each factor should exceed 0.8, indicating acceptable construct reliability (Chin, 2010). In PLS-SEM, the significance of the relationship among the construct  $R^2$ , the effect size  $f^2$ , and the Q2 are measured to evaluate how well a structural model performs (Chin, 1998). Regarding the assessment of  $f^2$ , effect size values less than 0.2 indicate no effect, while values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 respectively represent small, medium, and large effects (Cohen, 1988). The Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) has been evaluated as a reliable criterion for discriminant validity, the values of each construct should be less than 0.9, which indicates that the model possesses acceptable discriminant validity. As for the Q2 value, a value of 0.2, 0.15, or 0.35 indicates that a construct has small, medium, or large predictive relevance, respectively (Hair et al., 2016).

## Results

### *Measurement Model*

Table 2 displays the factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) of each element, contributing to the validation of the measurement model. The reliability of the individual items is also assessed. It is noted that all items exhibit factor loadings exceeding the minimum criterion of 0.7, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient surpasses 0.8. The reliability of the constructs is further confirmed by CR indices, all of which exceed 0.7. Regarding convergent validity, all latent variables demonstrate AVE values above

the threshold of 0.5, thus indicating acceptable convergent validity for the measurement model (Chin, 2010; Hair et al., 2011).

**Table 2** Assessment results of the measurement model

Factors/Constructs	Loading	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Community capital (CC)		0.873	0.912	0.707
- CC1: Social capital	0.874			
- CC2: Natural capital	0.879			
- CC3: Physical capital	0.745			
- CC4: Financial capital	0.824			
- CC5: Cultural capital	0.840			
Collaboration network (CN)		0.878	0.925	0.807
- CN1: Public sector	0.928			
- CN2: Private sector	0.904			
- CN3: Civil society sector	0.861			
Entrepreneurial skills (ES)		0.944	0.952	0.670
- ES1: Focus and open to novelty	0.823			
- ES2: Create solutions to emerging problems	0.866			
- ES3: Communicate effectively	0.734			
Sufficiency economy philosophy (SEP)		0.903	0.933	0.680
- SEP1: Moderation	0.775			
- SEP2: Reasonableness	0.857			
- SEP3: Self-immunity	0.854			
- SEP4: Knowledge	0.835			
- SEP5: Integrity	0.927			
Sustainable economic growth (SEG)		0.843	0.902	0.733
- SEG1: Income	0.828			
- SEG2: Nature balance	0.871			
- SEG3: Culture, way of life and wisdom	0.858			
- SEG4: Benefits	0.895			

The analysis of discriminant validity among the various constructs (latent variables) has been conducted using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. Regarding discriminant validity, the results based on the Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT are presented in Table 3, indicating that the model possesses acceptable discriminant validity. A HTMT value exceeding 0.9 suggests a lack of discriminant validity between the variables in the study; therefore, the threshold for acceptance should be below 0.85. Table 3 indicates that none of the HTMT values exceed 0.9.

**Table 3** Constructs discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion)

Factors	Fornell-Larcker criterion					HTMT			
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4
1. CN	0.898								
2. SEG	0.626	0.863				0.702			
3. SEP	0.631	0.744	0.844			0.710	0.846		
4. ES	0.527	0.668	0.602	0.869		0.575	0.744	0.643	
5. CC	0.651	0.736	0.764	0.563	0.784	0.729	0.834	0.857	0.613

### Structural Model

The study of the structural model must begin with the analysis of the sign, size, and significance of the path coefficients, the  $R^2$  values, and the  $Q^2$  test. We used the  $R^2$  value in the dependent variable to measure the explanatory power of the structural model. Overall, the results showed that the predictors provided a good explanation for the focal constructs in the model:  $R^2$  for entrepreneurial skills = 0.714, and  $R^2$  for sustainable economic growth = 0.772. The model  $R^2$  statistic in PLS-SEM demonstrates the extent to which hypothesized pathways combine to predict the dependent variable, as shown in Table 4. According to the results mentioned earlier, this can be interpreted as indicating good model fit (Chin, 2010).

**Table 4** Direct effects on variables

Factor	$R^2$	effect	Factor			
			CN	SEP	CC	ES
Entrepreneurial skills (ES)	0.714	DE	0.191*	0.649*	0.161	
		IE				
		TE	0.191*	0.649*	0.161	
Sustainable economic growth (SEG)	0.772	DE			0.189*	0.818*
		IE	0.155*	0.531*		
		TE	0.155*	0.531*	0.189*	0.818*

Note: DE: direct effect; IE: indirect effect; TE: total effect, \*  $p \leq .05$

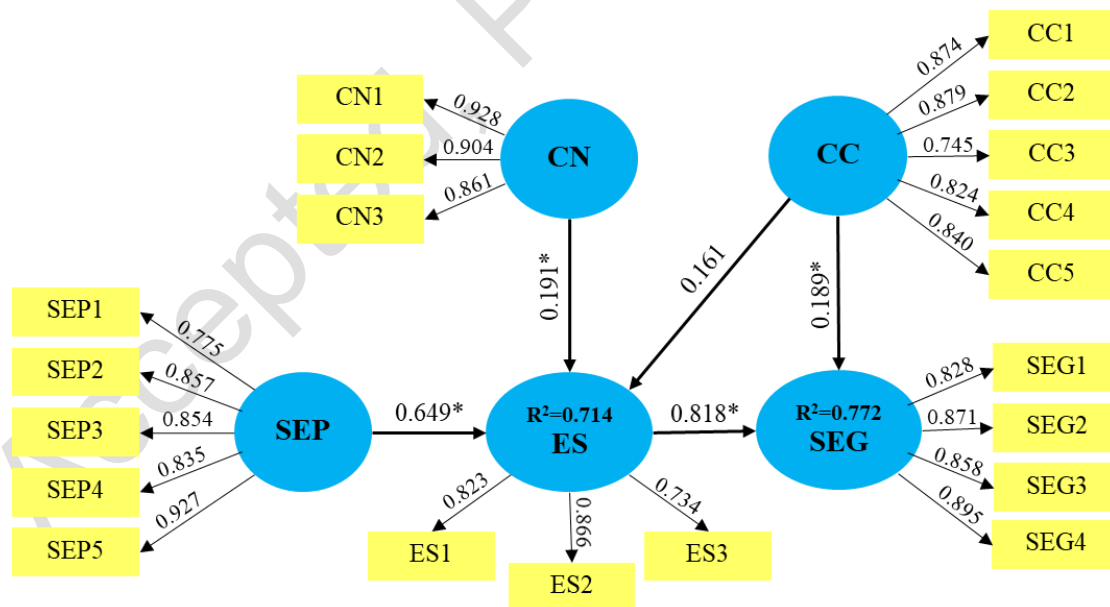
The bootstrapping technique was used to determine the t-statistics and the confidence intervals, thus obtaining the significance of the relationships. Table 5 offers the value of the t-statistic, the corresponding confidence intervals, and the verification of the proposed hypotheses' validity. The results showed that the collaboration network and sufficiency economy philosophy had a positive and significant effect on entrepreneurial skills, and community capital and entrepreneurial skills had a positive and significant effect on sustainable economic growth. Therefore, H4, H5, H1, and H2 were supported. However, the effect of

community capital on entrepreneurial skills was not significant; therefore, H3 was not supported.

**Table 5** The correlation between influencing factors and results of hypothesis testing

Hypotheses	Relationship	Path-coefficient	T-statistics	p values	Support
H1	CC → SEG	0.189	3.035	0.002	Yes
H2	ES → SEG	0.818	13.793	0.000	Yes
H3	CC → ES	0.161	1.612	0.108	No
H4	CN → ES	0.191	3.243	0.001	Yes
H5	SEP → ES	0.649	6.957	0.000	Yes

In PLS-SEM, regarding the significance of the relationship among the constructs, it was found that 71.4 percent of the variance in entrepreneurial skills can be explained by sufficiency economy philosophy and collaboration network, while 77.2 percent of the variance in sustainable economic growth can be explained by entrepreneurial skills and community capital. Entrepreneurial skills are a significant full mediator for the link between sufficiency economy philosophy and sustainable economic growth. In sum, the outcomes indicate that a significant effect of sufficiency economy philosophy on sustainable economic growth occurs when entrepreneurial skills are the mediator, as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2** The results of the structural model for sustainable economic growth

## Discussion

The factors influencing sustainable tourism economic growth in Lampang province, Thailand, were community capital and entrepreneurial skills. Entrepreneurial skills are a full mediator that can mediate the linkage between sufficiency economy philosophy and sustainable economic growth. This means that tourism entrepreneurs, in addition to having entrepreneurial skills, should apply the sufficiency economy philosophy to develop sustainable tourism. Meanwhile, the factors affecting sustainable tourism development in Vietnam were found to be social engagement, which has the strongest effect on sustainable tourism development, followed by state managerial competence, tourism service quality, the quality of tourism human resources, infrastructure development, material tourism facilities, and tourism resources (Mai et al., 2020). In conclusion, sustainable tourism is influenced by various factors that encompass environmental, social, economic, and policy dimensions. Successful sustainable tourism requires a holistic approach that integrates these factors to create a balance between preserving natural and cultural assets, promoting socio-economic development, and providing quality experiences for tourists (Alotaibi, 2024).

The application of sufficiency economy philosophy to community-based tourism can guarantee sustainability, as the philosophy emphasizes moderation in business operations. This means that the tourism business should not grow too quickly for the community to adapt to. Overgrowth can bring more harm than benefits to the community (Sammukkeethama, 2021). However, it is very challenging to convince community members to believe in the goals of the sufficiency economy philosophy and to realize its advantages (Jeerat et al., 2023). The sufficiency economy philosophy appears to have gained empirical support, demonstrating that there is no inherent contradiction between modern economics and the sufficiency economy philosophy; the two are fundamentally complementary. As a result, it can be expected that tourism organizations in the corporate world that use the sufficiency economy philosophy to guide their business activities will be able to sustain their business performance in the long run (Chartrungruang, 2020).

## Conclusion and Recommendation

Sustainable tourism seeks to both minimize the negative impacts of tourism and contribute to conservation and the well-being of the community, both economically and socially. The study of factors influencing sustainable tourism economic growth indicates that

entrepreneurial skills are a full mediator for the relationship between sufficiency economy philosophy and sustainable economic growth. Entrepreneurial skills include creative and innovative thinking, flexibility, strategic planning and evaluation, problem-solving and decision-making, leadership for change, effective and digital communication, teamwork, and collaborative networking. Sustainable tourism needs the participation of community members in the management and development of entrepreneurial skills, as well as the adoption of sufficiency economy philosophy to ensure sustainable economic growth. The adoption of sufficiency economy philosophy also ensures that tourism activities are operated in an environmentally, culturally, and traditionally friendly manner, creating sustainable income for the community, and that the community shares the benefits fairly.

Because this study chose community-based tourism as a case study, there are different methods of operation in each community. Community-based tourism is its own form of tourism and therefore does not have a definite theoretical framework that would allow it to be optimally developed in the current economic, social, environmental, and health dynamics (Llupart, 2022). It is recommended to select case studies carefully to cover other factors that may have an influence over different time frames (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020). Moreover, tourists themselves are very important stakeholders who should be included in future studies. Therefore, factors that influence tourists' decisions in selecting travel destinations should be examined as well.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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