ESG Frontier
Journal of Environmental, Social and Governance Studies
Vol. 1, No. 1 (January–June 2026) | Online

Bridging Sustainability, Experiential Learning, and Youth Leadership: A Global Research and Innovation Model (GYLRIM)

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Received: June 8,2026 / Revised: June., 2026 /

Accepted: June, 2026:

Abstract

This study proposes the Global Youth Leadership Research and Innovation Model (GYLRIM) as an integrated framework for advancing youth leadership within sustainability-oriented contexts. Addressing the growing need for interdisciplinary approaches, the study bridges experiential learning, cross-sector collaboration, and community engagement to connect education with real-world sustainability challenges.

Drawing upon experiential learning theory and sustainability-oriented development, the research develops a structured model consisting of input, process, and output layers. The model is applied through field-based practices that incorporate service learning and community participation. Data were collected through qualitative approaches, including observations, interviews, and document analysis, to examine how experiential learning environments contribute to leadership development and innovation.

The findings indicate that experiential and service-based learning significantly enhance youth leadership capacity, critical thinking, and social responsibility. In addition, cross-sector collaboration among educational institutions, communities, and public actors plays a crucial role in facilitating sustainable outcomes. The GYLRIM model demonstrates how the integration of educational resources, cultural

assets, and policy support can generate long-term impacts on both individual development and community sustainability.

This study contributes to the literature by offering a novel interdisciplinary framework that links education, sustainability, and youth empowerment. It also provides practical implications for policymakers, educators, and practitioners seeking to implement collaborative and sustainability-oriented development strategies. The model aligns with global sustainability agendas and offers a scalable approach applicable across diverse socio-cultural contexts.

Keywords

Sustainability; Experiential Learning; Youth Leadership; Service Learning; Cross-sector Collaboration; Community Engagement; Innovation Model; Sustainable Development; Education for Sustainability; GYLRIM

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Introduction

Background

Sustainable development, as emphasized by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), requires integrated approaches that combine environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Education is widely recognized as a fundamental driver of sustainability transformation (UNESCO, 2017).

Research Gap

Previous studies have primarily focused on:

- Sustainable tourism development
- Youth education or leadership training

However, **few studies integrate these domains into a unified operational model**, particularly in real-world community contexts. Furthermore, existing educational approaches often lack experiential and place-based learning mechanisms.

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Construct a theoretically grounded GYLRIM model
2. Integrate experiential learning with sustainability practices
3. Evaluate youth leadership outcomes through green tourism
4. Provide a replicable framework for global sustainability education

Literature Review

Sustainability and Green Tourism

Sustainability has become a central concept in tourism research, particularly in the context of environmental protection and community development. According to the United Nations, sustainable development emphasizes balancing economic growth, environmental protection, and social equity. In tourism, this has led to the emergence of green tourism, which promotes environmentally responsible travel practices and minimizes negative impacts on local ecosystems and communities (UNWTO, 2020).

Previous studies have highlighted that green tourism not only contributes to environmental conservation but also enhances local economic resilience and cultural preservation (Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

However, the successful implementation of sustainable tourism requires the integration of multiple stakeholders, including governments, educational institutions, and local communities (Hall, 2019).

Youth Leadership and Experiential Learning

Youth leadership development has gained increasing attention as a key driver of sustainable development. الشباب (youth) are recognized as important agents of change, particularly in addressing global challenges such as climate change and social inequality (UNESCO, 2017). Leadership skills, including critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving, are essential for empowering youth to contribute effectively to sustainability initiatives.

Experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) provides a strong foundation for youth leadership development. It emphasizes learning through direct experience, reflection, and application. Service learning, as a form of experiential learning, has been widely used to engage students in community-based projects, fostering both personal development and social responsibility (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Cross-sector Collaboration and Community Engagement

Sustainable development and tourism innovation require collaboration across different sectors, including academia, government, industry, and local communities. Cross-sector collaboration enables the sharing of resources, knowledge, and expertise, leading to more effective and innovative solutions (Bryson et al., 2015).

Community engagement is another critical component of sustainable tourism. Research shows that involving local communities in tourism planning and implementation enhances project sustainability and ensures that development aligns with local needs and values (Tosun, 2006). Participatory approaches also strengthen social capital and promote long-term commitment to sustainability initiatives.

Research Gap and Conceptual Development

Despite the growing body of literature on sustainability, youth leadership, and green tourism, there is a lack of integrated frameworks that combine these elements into a unified model. Most existing studies focus on individual aspects, such as environmental sustainability or leadership development, without addressing their interconnections in real-world contexts.

To address this gap, this study proposes the Global Youth Leadership Research and Innovation Model (GYLRIM), which integrates input resources, implementation processes, and outcome-based impacts within a continuous feedback system. This model aims to bridge theory and practice by providing a structured framework for promoting youth leadership and sustainable tourism development.

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative case study approach was adopted to explore real-world implementation.

Study Area

The research focuses on Tamlan and Jingtong regions in Taiwan, known for cultural heritage and green tourism development.

Data Collection

- Participant observation
- Activity documentation
- Stakeholder interviews
- Educational program records

Research Process

As shown in **Figure 1**, this study follows a structured research workflow, beginning with problem identification and literature review, followed by model construction, field implementation, and empirical validation.

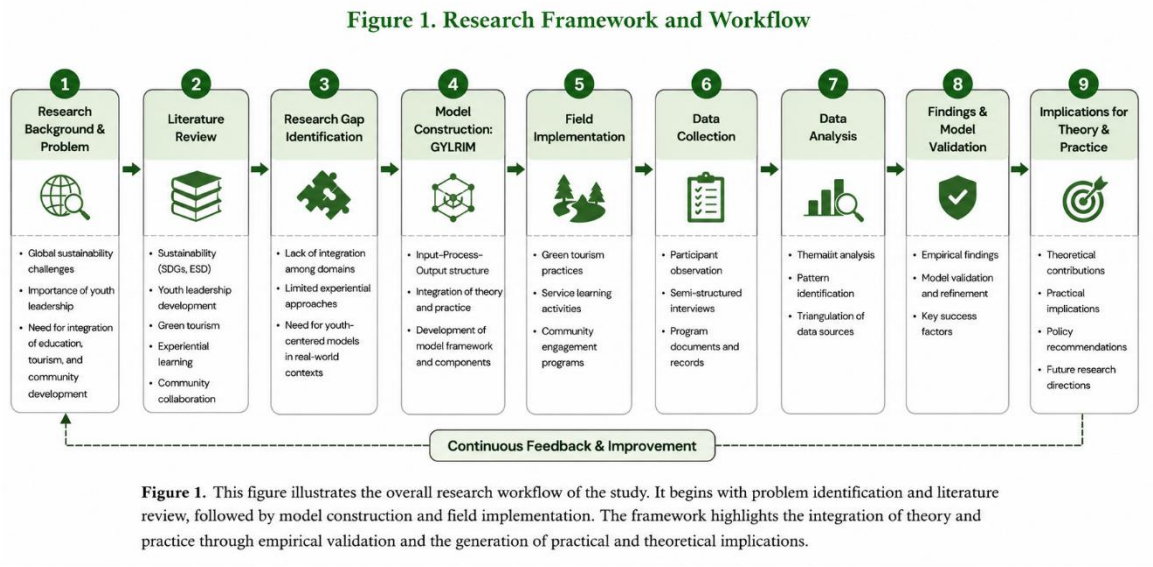


Figure 1. Research Process Framework

Problem Identification ⟶ Model Construction ⟶ Field Implementation ⟶ Data Collection ⟶ Analysis

This figure illustrates the overall research workflow of the study. It begins with problem identification and literature review, followed by model construction and field implementation. The framework highlights the integration of theory and practice through empirical validation and the generation of practical and theoretical implications.

Model Construction: GYLRIM

Model Structure

Figure 2 presents the conceptual structure of GYLRIM, integrating input, process, and output dimensions with a continuous feedback mechanism.

Based on previous studies on sustainability, experiential learning, and cross-sector collaboration (Hall, 2019; Kolb, 1984; Bryson et al., 2015), this study proposes the Global Youth Leadership Research and Innovation Model (GYLRIM), as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Global Youth Leadership Research and Innovation Model (GYLRIM)

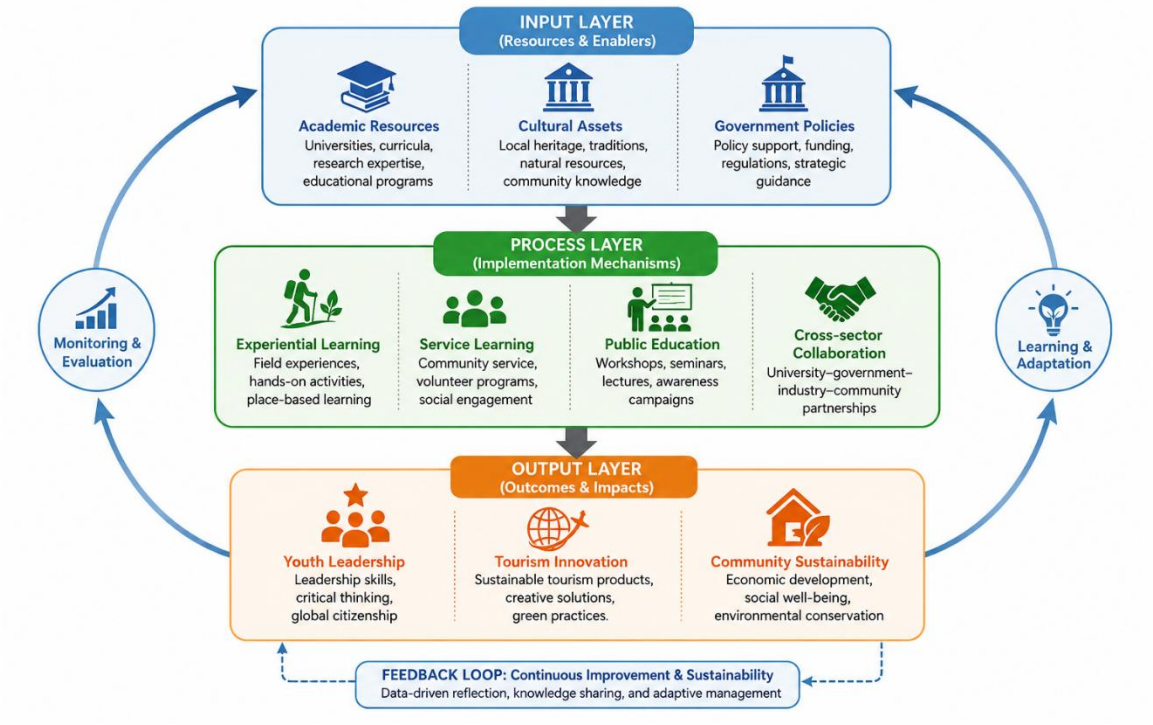


Figure 2. Global Youth Leadership Research and Innovation Model (GYLRIM)

This figure presents the Global Youth Leadership Research and Innovation Model (GYLRIM). The model consists of three layers: input, process, and output. The input layer includes educational resources, cultural assets, and policy support. The process layer emphasizes experiential learning and cross-sector collaboration. The output layer reflects the development of youth leadership and sustainable community outcomes. A feedback loop ensures continuous improvement and long-term sustainability.

Figure 2 presents the Global Youth Leadership Research and Innovation Model (GYLRIM), which provides an integrated framework for understanding how youth leadership can be cultivated through sustainable tourism practices. The model is structured into three interconnected layers: input, process, and output, supported by a continuous feedback mechanism.

The input layer consists of key foundational elements, including academic resources, cultural assets, and government policy support. These elements provide the necessary conditions for implementing educational and community-based initiatives. In particular, academic resources contribute theoretical knowledge, cultural assets offer contextual relevance, and policy support ensures institutional alignment and sustainability.

The process layer represents the core implementation stage of the model. It emphasizes experiential learning, service learning, public education, and cross-sector collaboration. These processes facilitate

active engagement among stakeholders and enable participants to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts. Through these interactive and participatory approaches, youth are able to develop critical competencies such as leadership, collaboration, and problem-solving.

The output layer reflects the expected outcomes of the model, including the enhancement of youth leadership, the promotion of tourism innovation, and the advancement of community sustainability. These outcomes demonstrate the model's potential to generate both educational and societal impacts.

Furthermore, the feedback loop highlights the dynamic and iterative nature of the model. By continuously incorporating feedback from implementation outcomes, the model allows for ongoing improvement and adaptation. This ensures long-term effectiveness and sustainability, bridging the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical applications.

Overall, GYLRIM provides a comprehensive and systematic approach to integrating education, tourism, and sustainability, offering both theoretical contributions and practical implications for future research and policy development.

Model Innovation

- Integrates **education + tourism + leadership**
- Emphasizes **real-world application**
- Supports **scalability and adaptability**

Results

Cross-Sector Collaboration

The integration of universities, local government, and community organizations enhances sustainability outcomes.

Effectiveness of Experiential Learning

Hands-on activities (e.g., ecological restoration, cultural workshops) significantly outperform traditional lecture-based approaches.

Youth Engagement Outcomes

Participants demonstrated:

- Increased sustainability awareness
- Stronger community attachment
- Enhanced leadership skills

Public Education Impact

Interactive formats showed higher effectiveness than passive learning.

Discussion

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several important theoretical contributions to the existing literature on sustainability, youth leadership, and tourism development.

First, this study contributes to the sustainability and tourism literature by proposing an integrated framework that connects sustainable tourism practices with youth leadership development. While previous studies have primarily examined sustainability and tourism governance from macro-level perspectives (Hall, 2019; Bramwell & Lane, 2011), this study shifts the focus toward the role of youth as active agents in driving sustainable development. By doing so, it extends the understanding of sustainability from a policy-oriented approach to a more participatory and educational perspective.

Second, this study advances the literature on experiential learning by embedding it within a real-world sustainability context. Although experiential learning theory has been widely discussed in educational research (Kolb, 1984; Eyler & Giles, 1999), its application in tourism and community-based sustainability initiatives remains limited. This study addresses this gap by demonstrating how experiential and service learning can be operationalized through tourism practices, thereby linking education with practical societal outcomes.

Third, this study contributes to the growing body of research on cross-sector collaboration by incorporating it as a central mechanism within the proposed model. Existing studies have highlighted the importance of collaboration among stakeholders (Bryson et al., 2015), but often lack a structured framework that illustrates how such collaboration can be systematically implemented. The GYLRIM model provides a clear structure that integrates academic institutions, government agencies, and local communities, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of collaborative governance in sustainability contexts.

Finally, this study proposes the Global Youth Leadership Research and Innovation Model (GYLRIM) as a novel conceptual framework that integrates input, process, and output dimensions within a continuous

feedback system. Unlike previous fragmented approaches, this model offers a holistic and dynamic perspective that bridges the gap between theory and practice. It not only enriches theoretical discussions but also provides a foundation for future empirical research in the fields of sustainable tourism and youth development.

Overall, this study extends existing theories by integrating sustainability, education, and collaboration into a unified framework, thereby contributing to both academic research and practical applications.

Implications

This study provides comprehensive theoretical, practical, and policy implications by proposing the Global Youth Leadership Research and Innovation Model (GYLRIM) as an integrated framework for advancing youth leadership within sustainability-oriented contexts.

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the literature by synthesizing experiential learning theory, sustainability-oriented development, and youth leadership studies into a unified analytical framework. By extending the application of experiential learning beyond traditional classroom settings (Kolb, 1984), the study demonstrates its effectiveness in cultivating leadership competencies through real-world engagement. In addition, it responds to the growing demand for interdisciplinary approaches in sustainability research (Hall, 2019), offering a structured model that bridges education, social participation, and long-term developmental outcomes.

In terms of practical implications, this study provides actionable insights for multiple stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, practitioners, and local communities. For policymakers, the GYLRIM model offers a structured framework for integrating youth engagement into sustainability strategies. Governments can utilize this model to design policies that support experiential learning programs, promote cross-sector collaboration, and encourage youth participation in sustainability initiatives. By aligning educational programs with broader development goals, policymakers can enhance both social impact and policy effectiveness.

For educational institutions, the findings highlight the importance of incorporating experiential and service-learning approaches into curricula. Universities and schools can adopt the GYLRIM model to develop interdisciplinary programs that connect academic knowledge with real-world applications. Such approaches not only enhance students' leadership skills and critical thinking but also strengthen their sense of social responsibility and capacity to address complex global challenges.

For industry practitioners and organizational stakeholders, the results suggest that engaging youth in practice-based initiatives can foster innovation and sustainability. Through collaboration with educational

institutions and local communities, organizations can co-create meaningful and context-specific experiences that contribute to both organizational development and broader societal goals.

For local communities, the model emphasizes active participation and co-creation. Community members play a crucial role in shaping development initiatives, ensuring alignment with local needs, cultural values, and sustainability priorities. This participatory approach enhances social cohesion and improves the long-term viability of development efforts.

At the policy level, the proposed model aligns closely with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, it supports SDG 4 (Quality Education) by promoting inclusive and practice-based learning, SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) through community engagement and sustainable practices, and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) by emphasizing cross-sector collaboration. The model therefore provides a practical pathway for integrating education, sustainability, and youth empowerment into cohesive development strategies.

Overall, the GYLRIM model offers a comprehensive roadmap for bridging theory and practice, facilitating collaboration across sectors, and supporting the development of sustainable and youth-centered innovation systems in diverse contexts.

Conclusion

This study develops and proposes the Global Youth Leadership Research and Innovation Model (GYLRIM) as an integrated framework for advancing youth leadership within sustainability-oriented contexts. By bridging experiential learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, and real-world engagement, the model offers a structured approach to connecting education, community participation, and long-term development outcomes.

The findings demonstrate that experiential and service-based learning play a critical role in fostering youth leadership, particularly when supported by cross-sector collaboration and community involvement. The GYLRIM model highlights how the integration of academic resources, cultural assets, and policy support can generate meaningful learning processes that lead to leadership development, innovation, and sustainable community outcomes. In doing so, this study not only reinforces the value of practice-based education but also illustrates the importance of aligning educational initiatives with broader societal and developmental goals.

Furthermore, this research contributes to the growing body of interdisciplinary sustainability studies by offering a scalable and adaptable framework that can be applied across diverse contexts. The model emphasizes continuous feedback and iterative improvement, ensuring its relevance in dynamic social, educational, and policy environments.

Despite these contributions, this study is not without limitations. The model is primarily conceptual and context-driven, and future research is encouraged to conduct empirical testing across different regions and institutional settings to further validate its applicability. Quantitative approaches and longitudinal studies may also provide deeper insights into the long-term impacts of youth leadership development within sustainability frameworks.

In conclusion, the GYLRIM model provides a comprehensive pathway for integrating education, youth empowerment, and sustainability. It offers both theoretical value and practical relevance, supporting the development of more inclusive, collaborative, and sustainable systems for future generations.

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