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Communication process and tourism branding through the tourist destination policy under the green tourism promotion strategy in Thailand during the COVID-19 pandemic situation

Teerati Banterngr^{1,*}, Apichaya Tipmonthien¹, Vinijphat Kanyapong²

¹ Graduate School of Communication Arts and Management Innovation, National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), Bangkok 10240, Thailand

² Department of Digital Film and Acting, School of Communication Arts, University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, Bangkok 10240, Thailand

* **Corresponding author:** Teerati Banterngr, teerati.ban@nida.ac.th

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Abstract: What does it mean for a national government to communicate green tourism, and for whom does that communication actually work? This study takes up these questions through a retrospective qualitative case study of Thailand's Green Tourism Promotion Strategy (2017–2021) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on policy document analysis, semi-structured interviews with nine government officials, and four focus group discussions involving 20 tourism stakeholders, the study examines how different actor groups, policymakers, tourism businesses, and the general public, understood and responded to sustainability-framed communication about destinations in Thailand. The findings show that government officials and senior policy practitioners consistently framed green tourism within a holistic sustainability agenda, whereas local business owners and tourists typically understood it in narrower terms, principally as environmental protection, waste reduction, or nature-based experience. Moreover, digital platforms proved indispensable during the pandemic, sustaining destination visibility and circulating messages about responsible travel; yet the reach of this communication was uneven, and the alignment it was supposed to produce was largely absent. On this basis, the study argues that green tourism destination branding in Thailand needs to be reconceptualized: not as a message transmitted downward from policy to public, but as a shared meaning constructed through more inclusive, segmented, and culturally grounded communication, one that actively involves local intermediaries and bridges the gap between official sustainability rhetoric and lived tourism practice.

Keywords: policy communication; green tourism; destination branding; COVID-19; Thailand

1. Introduction

Tourism's economic impact worldwide is considerable and extensively researched, contributing significantly to GDP growth, job creation, and local development in various nations [1]. In Thailand, the tourism industry has been a key element of national economic policy for many years, serving both as a source of foreign exchange and as a means of enhancing the country's global image while promoting environmental development [2].

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, brought this trajectory into sharp and painful relief. By the close of 2020, international tourist arrivals had collapsed from nearly 40 million in 2019 to approximately 6.7 million, a contraction that, according to figures from the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, translated into an 82.6 % decline in tourism revenue [3].

The Thai government's response to the disruption was not passive. The Green Tourism Promotion Strategy (2017–2021) was at the heart of its recovery strategy, with a renewed emphasis on sustainable tourism. This policy framework was developed in accordance with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [4] and centered on three interconnected priorities: Environmental preservation, community involvement, and economic sustainability [5]. This strategic focus included an awareness that communication is not an afterthought in sustainability policy; rather, it is a necessary component. Strategic communication changes tourist impressions, establishes destination identity, and fosters the shared understanding among stakeholders required for sustainability projects to succeed [6,7]. On this reading, green tourism is both a communication and an environmental effort. However, evidence suggests that this communicative dimension has been imperfectly realized: Research in comparable contexts shows that both the general public and tourism operators frequently misunderstand what green tourism means, defaulting to simplified associations with environmental protection rather than engaging with its larger sustainability logic [8,9].

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified these communication tensions. As the industry shifted rapidly toward digital and social media platforms, the conditions under which tourism-related messages were produced, distributed, and interpreted changed dramatically [10,11]. The analytical importance of the pandemic in this study, however, does not lie in treating COVID-19 as a crisis topic for its own sake; rather, it functions as a crisis condition that intensified pre-existing weaknesses in policy communication, especially problems of message clarity, uneven access, and stakeholder alignment.

Despite substantial scholarship on green tourism, destination branding, and tourism communication, prior studies have tended to examine these themes separately or from a single stakeholder perspective. Recent studies have advanced understanding of digital destination branding, sustainability value in destination marketing, co-designed destination experiences, and destination branding under crisis conditions [12–16]. However, limited research has examined how sustainability-oriented policy communication is interpreted across multiple stakeholder levels during crisis conditions, and how these divergent interpretations shape destination branding outcomes. The knowledge gap addressed here therefore concerns mechanism rather than description: How policy meanings travel, fragment, and are reconstructed as they move from national strategy to intermediary actors and local tourism practice. To address this gap, the study uses document analysis, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions to examine how green tourism policy was communicated during the COVID-19 pandemic through Thailand's Green Tourism Promotion Strategy (2017–2021), and how different stakeholders understood, interpreted, and responded to it. In theoretical terms, the article contributes by showing that policy-communication gaps are not simply failures of message delivery, but processes of multi-level meaning reconstruction that become more consequential under crisis conditions. The paper is organized as follows: It begins with the theoretical foundations, then details the study design, offers the findings, and concludes with a discussion of the implications for policy and communication strategy connected to sustainable tourist development.

Research objectives are as follows:

1. To examine how Thailand's Green Tourism Promotion Strategy was communicated during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To analyze how different stakeholder groups interpreted and responded to green tourism communication.
3. To identify communication gaps affecting destination branding outcomes.
4. To propose communication directions for more inclusive and resilient green destination branding in future crises.

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

2.1. Green tourism and sustainable development

Green tourism is not a fixed or singular concept. It is situated broadly within sustainable development frameworks that emphasize environmentally responsible travel, resource conservation, and community participation [5], and its meaning is contested and context dependent. The Green Tourism Promotion Strategy (2017–2021) in Thailand institutionalized the concept, aligning it with the Sustainable Development Goals [4] and promoting a suite of commitments: reduced ecological impact, support for local economies, and promotion of environmentally responsible visitor behavior. The 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan further bolstered these commitments by recognizing green tourism as a strategic component of national development and a mechanism for enhancing Thailand's competitive position in global travel markets [2]. Recent tourism research similarly emphasizes that sustainability can add value to destination marketing when it is communicated in ways that tourists can understand, evaluate, and connect with destination image [13].

What makes this policy context analytically instructive is precisely the gap it reveals between aspiration and practice. Ruimai [8] has documented the tendency of public audiences to reduce green tourism to nature-based travel, thereby stripping it of its wider sustainability content. Moreover, Bounpathaph, et al. [9] identify a related problem: perceptions of green destinations vary considerably across cultural groups, shaped by accumulated experience and prior expectation rather than by policy definitions. Both facts have substantial implications. Designing messages that may bridge the gap between policy intention and public understanding is more than just a technical issue; it necessitates paying close attention to how various audiences make meaning from the materials they encounter.

2.2. Strategic and policy communication in tourism

The communicative dimension of tourism policy has attracted sustained scholarly interest, though its complexity is not always fully captured in practical strategy. Communication is central to transmitting policy, shaping destination image, and encouraging behavioral change among stakeholders and visitors [6]. Kozak and Decrop [7] remind us that tourism image is not given; it is produced through the intersection of personal experience, media representation, and interpersonal exchange. This means that communication in tourism cannot be reduced to promotion: It also constitutes the lens through which destinations are interpreted and evaluated. A well-designed communication strategy can enhance tourist satisfaction and reinforce

destination loyalty [10]; the inverse, poorly designed or incoherent communication, can undermine both Frey and George [11] likewise emphasize that collaboration between government agencies and tourism stakeholders is essential for advancing responsible tourism practices, a point that becomes especially salient during crisis conditions.

In sustainability contexts, these challenges are compounded. Communication must do more than convey information; it must generate shared understanding, cultivate persuasion, and support collective orientation toward common goals. During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital platforms became the dominant channel of interaction, and the requirements of adaptability and inclusiveness became more pressing still [12,17–19]. Mongkolchart, et al. [20] add an important cultural dimension, showing how interactive and symbolic communication functions in community-based tourism settings in ways that differ from purely informational approaches. This study further draws on Saeho's [21] framework of communication objectives, informing, educating, persuading, entertaining, facilitating learning, and supporting decision-making, as a conceptual touchstone for examining how green tourism communication was designed and whether it achieved its intended purposes.

2.3. Destination branding and image-building

Destination branding is the process through which a coherent and appealing image is constructed, differentiated from competitors, and communicated to target audiences. Wang and Pizam [6] situate branding simultaneously as a communication strategy and as a source of competitive advantage, a framing that is especially pertinent in the context of sustainable tourism, where credibility and authenticity are as important as attractiveness. For green tourism specifically, branding requires that sustainability principles be communicated alongside emotional appeal and trustworthiness; destinations cannot simply assert their environmental credentials, they must make those credentials legible and credible to audiences with varying degrees of environmental awareness. Recent studies of destination sustainability value, destination brand love, green destination brand equity, and place-related identity further show that sustainable branding depends on both perceived credibility and emotionally meaningful destination associations [13,15,22,23].

Recent scholarship on green tourism and digital destination branding reinforces this point. Chen and colleagues [24] identify brand transparency and stakeholder collaboration as key determinants of consumer perception, suggesting that effective destination branding is a coordinated process rather than a unilateral act of promotion. The large-scale evidence reported by Taecharungroj and Pattaratanakun [18], based on analysis of 113 destination marketing organizations during the COVID-19 crisis, shows that crisis communication in tourism requires strategic adaptation, not routine promotion, with organizations that adapted their content strategies faring considerably better than those that did not. Recent work on digital destination branding and emerging immersive branding environments further indicates that destination meaning is increasingly co-produced through digital interfaces, visual storytelling, and participatory brand experiences [12,25]. Bakker's Destination Marketing and Management Model [26] is particularly instructive in this context, given its emphasis

on narrative, experience, and multi-stakeholder participation in the production of destination meaning. This framework informed both the empirical design of the study and the interpretation of its findings, particularly as they bear on digital storytelling and community engagement in branding [27].

2.4. Policy communication during crises

The COVID-19 pandemic did not merely disrupt tourism; it exposed the structural vulnerabilities of tourism communication frameworks in ways that are analytically illuminating. Restrictions on movement, changes in tourist behavior, and the pervasiveness of health anxiety collectively reshaped how tourism destinations could position themselves, and what audiences were willing to hear. Aguinis and colleagues [1] argue that crisis communication must be timely, targeted, and transparent if it is to maintain stakeholder trust and preserve destination relevance, a prescription that, as this study will show, was only partially met in the Thai case. Research on destination image in health crises and technology-enabled sustainable tourism similarly shows that crisis contexts reshape destination-brand evaluation, perceived risk, and the channels through which sustainability claims are assessed [16,28]. Social media became indispensable for promoting domestic travel and sustaining awareness of environmental initiatives, even as inconsistencies in message clarity and audience reach remained [29,30].

These limitations point to the need for more integrated strategies: ones that can link national policy, local implementation, and public engagement in a more coordinated and mutually reinforcing way. The literature reviewed here suggests, in summary, that green tourism and sustainability are widely recognized as policy priorities, but their practical realization depends on communication that is inclusive, coherent, and strategically managed. Recent studies also suggest that sustainability-oriented destination communication is most effective when it combines credible environmental narratives, digital visibility, co-designed experiences, and attention to health-crisis risk perceptions [13,14,16,31]. It is against this background that the present study examines how that challenge was navigated in Thailand during a period of acute crisis, and what that experience reveals about the possibilities for more effective communication going forward. **Figure 1** shows a policy-derived framework adapted from Thailand's Green Tourism Promotion Strategy 2017–2021. This framework illustrates how the concept of sustainable development was operationalized into strategic directions for green tourism, and it served as a reference point during the document analysis phase.

3. Methodology

This study employs a retrospective qualitative case study design to investigate how green tourism policy was communicated, understood, and enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic, with specific reference to Thailand's Green Tourism Promotion Strategy (2017–2021). Three methods were combined: Document analysis, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. Bringing these together was deliberate, as no single method would have been sufficient to capture the range of actor positions,

communication processes, and interpretive frameworks in play across the tourism system.



Figure 1. A framework for transferring the concept of sustainable development into green tourism strategies, adapted from Thailand’s Green Tourism Promotion Strategy 2017–2021.

Notes: Author’s translation and synthesis from Ministry of Tourism and Sports (2017) [5].

The conceptual framework depicted in **Figure 2** holds that the impacts of destination branding do not arise directly from policy declarations; rather, they are mediated by communication processes that translate policy into locally legible and actionable messages. In Thailand, this process was shaped by the Green Tourism Promotion Strategy on one side and by the varying capacities and dispositions of diverse stakeholder groups on the other. The framework further identifies several conditioning factors, post-pandemic recovery pressures, local communication infrastructure, and resource constraints, that affected whether communication could produce the alignment it sought.

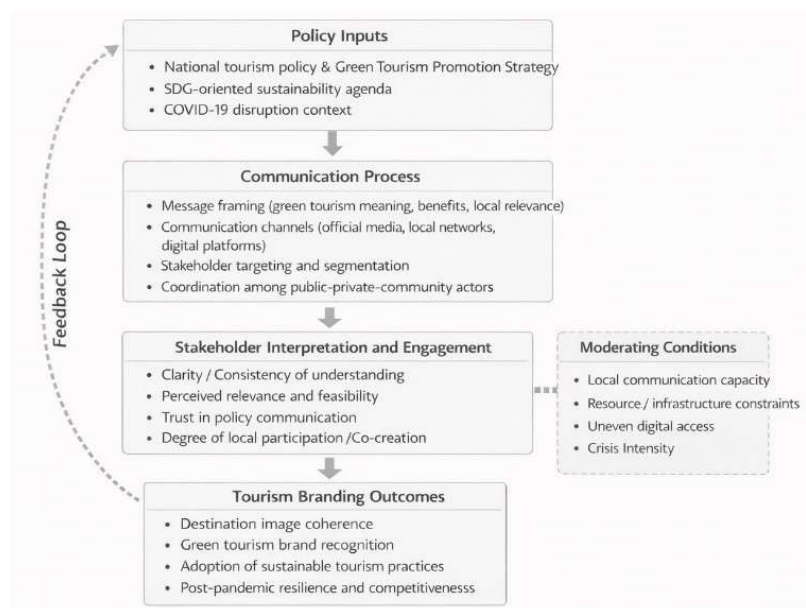


Figure 2. Conceptual framework.

In this framework, policy communication affects stakeholder engagement, trust, and perceptions, which in turn influence the success of sustainable tourism initiatives, the visibility of eco-friendly brands, and the consistency of destination image. The framework also suggests that this relationship is conditioned by post-pandemic recovery pressures, local communication capabilities, digital access, and resource constraints.

Stakeholder feedback provides insights that can be used to enhance the quality of policy communication. Because this is a qualitative case study, the research does not establish statistical hypotheses. Instead, data collection and analysis are guided by analytical propositions derived from the theoretical frameworks described above. These propositions offer a conceptual structure for assessing the influence of policy communication on stakeholder understanding and destination-branding outcomes within Thailand's green tourism sector.

Analytical propositions:

AP1: Policy communication clarity improves stakeholder alignment on green tourism meaning.

AP2: Stakeholder understanding and trust are likely to shape participation in green tourism implementation.

AP3: Multi-stakeholder coordination is likely to influence the coherence of destination branding.

AP4: Local capacity and post-pandemic recovery conditions are likely to condition the effectiveness of policy communication for branding outcomes.

3.1. Document analysis

The first phase of the study involved systematic analysis of national policy documents relevant to green tourism. These included the Green Tourism Promotion Strategy 2017–2021 [5], the 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan [2], and supporting directives from the Ministry of Tourism and Sports. The analysis was designed to map the communication goals embedded within each document, to assess the internal coherence of policy framing, and to evaluate the extent to which stated commitments were aligned with recognized principles of sustainable development.

3.2. In-depth interviews

The second phase involved semi-structured interviews with nine government officials and policy practitioners who had been directly engaged in tourism strategy and environmental management. Participants were selected through purposive sampling across the following organizations: The Tourism Authority of Thailand; the Ministry of Tourism and Sports; the Department of Tourism; the National Tourism Policy Committee; the Department of Environmental Quality Promotion; the Pollution Control Department; the Community Development Department; the Royal Forestry Department; and the Ministry of Labor. The interviews focused on participants' understandings of green tourism, the communication challenges they encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic, and their perspectives on stakeholder engagement and coordination.

3.3. Focus groups

The third phase involved four focus group discussions with 20 participants drawn from diverse tourism-related occupations, each group representing a distinct stakeholder segment: individuals working at tourist attractions; social media travel enthusiasts and content creators (members of travel-oriented Facebook groups with more than 100,000 followers); local guides, interpreters, and tour operators; and small business owners in food, retail, and souvenir sectors.

Each focus group followed a thematic guide primarily informed by William Bakker's Destination Marketing and Management Model [26], with additional cultural communication insights drawn from Mongkolchart's et al work [20]. The discussions centered on perceptions of green tourism, communication channels used, and behavioral impacts during the pandemic.

3.4. Data collection and analysis

Data collection took place from April to November 2022. All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in Thai, audio-recorded with participant consent, transcribed, and imported into NVivo for thematic analysis. Coding combined deductive and inductive procedures. The research team began with open coding to identify recurrent concepts related to policy communication, stakeholder interpretation, communication channels, and destination-branding effects. These initial codes were then grouped through axial coding into higher-order categories and refined through selective coding into the four themes reported in the Results section. To strengthen analytic rigor, theme verification, peer checking, and analytic validation by the research team were conducted throughout the coding process by comparing interpretations across policy documents, interview transcripts, and focus group materials. Given the purposive and stakeholder-segmented design, the aim was analytical depth and cross-group comparison rather than statistical representativeness; the dataset was considered sufficient when later-stage analysis yielded strong thematic repetition and no substantially new interpretive categories across stakeholder groups. Strict ethical protocols were observed throughout. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, data were anonymized, and the study was reviewed and approved by the NIDA Ethics Committee.

4. Results

The findings are presented under four main headings, corresponding to the study's analytical propositions: stakeholder understandings of green tourism; policy communication and destination image-building before the pandemic; communication practices during COVID-19; and post-pandemic shifts in strategy and attitude. Taken together, the results show a system under strain, one in which the gap between policy ambition and local meaning-making proved both persistent and consequential.

4.1. Divergent understandings of green tourism

Perhaps the most consistent finding across all data sources was the fragmentation of meaning surrounding the concept of green tourism itself. Government officials and senior policy practitioners spoke of green tourism in terms broadly aligned with

national policy, emphasizing an integrated sustainability framework linking environmental protection to cultural preservation and economic development [11,32]. Moving down the tourism system, however, the picture changed substantially. Many local business owners and tourism workers understood green tourism as something far more circumscribed, often synonymous, in their accounts, with eco-tourism, or reduced to practical environmental measures such as plastic reduction and waste management.

Tour operators and guides, for instance, consistently described green tourism as “*promoting eco-tourism and preserving natural attractions*”, while food and souvenir entrepreneurs tended to frame it around product sourcing and packaging choices. The distinction between green tourism and eco-tourism was a source of genuine confusion for many participants, pointing to a conceptual gap that existing communication strategies had not successfully closed [29]. **Table 1** illustrates the divergent interpretations evident across stakeholder groups and the types of misconceptions most common within each. The pattern is important: it suggests that green tourism as a policy concept did not travel effectively across the communication chain.

Table 1. Comparative understanding of green tourism across stakeholder groups.

Stakeholder group	Key interpretation of green tourism	Notable misconceptions
Policy Makers	Emphasis on sustainability integration (environment, economy, culture)	Minor; generally aligned with national strategy
Attraction Workers	Focus on sustainability and cleanliness at sites	Viewed as mostly a governmental agenda
Tour Operators / Guides	Emphasis on eco-tourism and site preservation	Often equated “ <i>green</i> ” with “ <i>eco</i> ” tourism
Social Media Enthusiasts	Some awareness of green tourism campaigns	Confusion about differences between green and eco campaigns
Local Entrepreneurs	Associated with plastic bans, local product sourcing	Narrowly viewed as nature conservation only

Notes: Summary derived from focus group discussions by the authors.

4.2. Policy communication and destination image-building before the pandemic

Before COVID-19 arrived, tourism promotion in Thailand operated through well-established channels: television advertising, printed brochures, and face-to-face events such as tourism fairs. Government officials interviewed for this study were largely comfortable describing this as a period of stable and coherent promotion, with Tourism Authority of Thailand branding initiatives explicitly organized around constructing a favorable international image of the country [5]. These efforts included the promotion of secondary cities, the organization of eco-tourism activities, and participation in global sustainability platforms.

Focus group participants recalled several pre-pandemic campaigns, including initiatives to reduce plastic and foam use, promotions for reusable consumer products, and community-based nature tourism programs. However, a recurrent qualification ran through many of these accounts: The campaigns worked well for urban audiences and those with strong social media engagement, but they consistently failed to reach rural populations who relied on face-to-face networks for information. This uneven

reach was not incidental; it reflects a structural feature of the communication system that would be magnified considerably once the pandemic arrived.

4.3. Communication during the COVID-19 pandemic

When mobility restrictions came into force, the tourism communication landscape shifted rapidly. Physical channels became inaccessible virtually overnight, and all stakeholders reported a dramatic acceleration of digital communication: online video campaigns, influencer marketing, and livestreamed presentations of natural attractions became the primary modes of outreach. Policy officials confirmed that communication budgets were redirected toward social media channels as part of pandemic-responsive strategy [3]. This pattern is consistent with recent studies showing that destination marketing organizations and digital branding systems became central to maintaining destination visibility during crisis conditions [12,18].

The shift was not, however, uniformly effective. Focus group data showed that many tourism-dependent businesses suspended their green tourism activities during this period, prioritizing economic survival over environmental messaging. Tour guides and attraction managers described significant revenue losses, and some reported permanent business closures. At the same time, an interesting countertrend emerged: certain attractions, particularly in northern Thailand, persisted with eco-friendly practices and reported an uptick in what participants described as “*responsible tourists*” in the immediate aftermath of lockdown restrictions being lifted [8,9].

More broadly, participants observed a perceptible shift in public values during this period. Many tourists, according to focus group accounts, became more attuned to environmental cleanliness, health protocols, and the sustainability implications of their travel choices. This created an opening, not yet fully exploited, to reposition green tourism not merely as nature conservation, but as part of a broader orientation toward responsible consumption and mindful travel.

4.4. Post-pandemic communication shifts and emerging attitudes

As travel restrictions eased, promotional activity intensified across both public and private sectors. Social media, television advertising, and cross-industry partnerships were widely deployed. The government introduced specific demand-stimulation initiatives, including We Travel Together and the Co-Payment Subsidy, designed to boost domestic tourism and direct travelers toward less-visited destinations [33].

Focus group participants described growing openness among domestic travelers to explore destinations linked to health, wellness, nature, and community experience. Local guides and entrepreneurs confirmed that sales of One Tambon One Product (OTOP) goods had increased in the wake of domestic tourism campaigns, generating new income streams for rural communities [30].

Attitudinal change was also evident: participants reported a gradual but noticeable shift from apathy toward environmental awareness, with tourists demonstrating more active endorsement of sustainable behaviors, responsible waste management, locally sourced purchasing, and the selection of environmentally conscious accommodation. These shifts are consistent with recent evidence that

destination brand attachment, green destination brand equity, and perceived destination sustainability can encourage environmentally responsible behavior [15,22]. Persistent constraints, however, should not be overlooked. Older age cohorts and rural populations with limited digital access remained largely outside the reach of these campaigns, a finding that echoes the analysis of Alonso-Muñoz et al. [34] and reinforces the structural communication limitations identified in earlier sections. **Table 2** presents selected participant quotes organized by thematic category, offering direct evidence for each of the patterns described above.

Table 2. Selected participant quotes by thematic category.

Theme	Stakeholder group	Quote
Divergent understandings	Tour operator	<i>“Green tourism and eco-tourism? Aren’t they the same?”</i>
	Local entrepreneur	<i>“For me, green tourism just means not using plastic and taking care of nature.”</i>
Pre-pandemic communication	Tourism officer	<i>“Before COVID, we relied mostly on tourism fairs and local events.”</i>
Pandemic-era challenges	Restaurant owner	<i>“During COVID, we just tried to survive. Green tourism was not our focus.”</i>
	TAT regional staff	<i>“We moved everything online... but not many locals followed.”</i>
Post-pandemic attitudes	Eco-lodge operator	<i>“More Thai tourists now ask about nature trips and healthy food.”</i>
	Market vendor	<i>“Sales of OTOP products increased because people wanted local things.”</i>

Notes: Quotes derived from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions by the authors.

5. Discussion

What the findings ultimately reveal is less a story about the failure of green tourism policy than about the fragility of the communication architecture through which that policy was supposed to travel. The divergence between policy framing and local interpretation is symptomatic of a system in which the meaning of green tourism was constructed at the national level without sufficient attention to whether, and how, that meaning could be reproduced and taken up by actors positioned differently within the tourism system. This gap was not merely semantic; it shaped how policy could actually be enacted on the ground. Policymakers spoke of green tourism in terms of comprehensive sustainability; local actors translated it into practical, bounded categories, eco-tourism, environmental cleanliness, and recycling. This translation problem matters because effective sustainable tourism management depends on substantive alignment between policy intention, private-sector practice, and destination-branding credibility [11,12,13,22]. What appeared coherent at the policy level became narrower and more selective in local practice. When that alignment is absent, policy becomes rhetorical rather than operational. Thus, the policy did travel, but it did not travel intact. **Table 3** situates these findings within the broader literature.

Viewed theoretically, this pattern suggests that sustainability-oriented policy communication should not be understood as a linear transmission process in which policy meanings move intact from the state to the public. Rather, the evidence points to a mechanism of multi-level meaning reconstruction: policy actors articulate broad sustainability frames, intermediary actors simplify or adapt them, and local stakeholders reinterpret them through immediate operational concerns and lived tourism practice. This mechanism is consistent with recent place-branding and identity research showing that destination meaning depends on how place image, place identity,

and stakeholder identification are constructed and negotiated across actor groups [23]. The contribution of the study, therefore, is not merely to document a Thai case, but to clarify how destination-branding outcomes are shaped by the way policy meanings are translated across levels of the tourism system.

The pandemic is analytically important in this argument not because the paper is primarily about social crisis as a standalone topic, but because crisis conditions amplified pre-existing communication breakdowns. As channels shifted online and survival pressures intensified, weaknesses in message clarity, access, and stakeholder coordination became more visible and more consequential. In this sense, COVID-19 functioned as a stress test that exposed the fragility of policy communication and the limits of assuming shared understanding across stakeholder groups.

Table 3. Thematic findings and alignment with previous studies.

Theme	Key finding from this study	Supported by
Stakeholder misalignment	Divergence in understanding and implementation of green tourism	Smit et al. [14]; Frey & George [11]; Azam & Sarker [32]; Dangi & Jamal [35]
Pandemic communication shift	Digital media dominated, excluding offline communities	Confetto et al. [12]; Taecharungroj & Pattaratanakun [18]; Pachucki et al. [19]; Alonso-Muñoz, et al. [34]; Buluk Eşitti [36]
Behavioral change in tourists	Growth in environmental awareness and local engagement post-COVID	Bounpathaph et al. [9]; Zhang et al. [15]; Aziz & Niazi [22]; Fakfare, et al. [30]; El Gamil [37]; Kovačić et al. [38]
Semantic ambiguity	Confusion between “ <i>green tourism</i> ” and “ <i>eco-tourism</i> ”	Gotham & Lewis [17]; Strandberg & Styvén [23]; Dekhili & Achabou [39]; Guo et al. [40]; Mihalic [41]; Weber [42]

The pandemic made this problem harder to ignore. As communication channels shifted toward digital platforms, the gap between those who could be reached and those who could not became more visible and more consequential. On paper, digital communication appeared to offer continuity at a moment of profound disruption. Tourism authorities were able to maintain destination visibility and continue outreach during lockdown periods [3], yet this relative success masked an underlying limitation: digital-heavy communication strategies also reproduced, and in some cases deepened, the exclusion of older populations, rural communities, and those without reliable online access. In practice, the move online did not remove structural inequalities; it simply relocated them into a new communicative environment. Elliott [43] emphasizes the importance of inter-agency coordination and public participation in tourism governance, particularly where communication infrastructure is uneven, and the Thai case makes clear that this unevenness was not resolved by the shift to digital channels. This finding aligns with research showing that digital destination branding and technology-enabled sustainability can strengthen visibility, but only when access, inclusion, and stakeholder capacity are built into communication design [12,28,34].

A second issue concerns the quality, not merely the reach, of the communication that did occur. Put differently, communication was sustained, but it was not necessarily persuasive, inclusive, or identity-building. Bakker’s Destination Marketing and Management Model [26] posits that effective destination branding requires storytelling, emotional resonance, and opportunities for user-generated content. Against this standard, the communication described by study participants was largely informational and reactive. Green tourism was communicated as a set of policy directives rather than as a meaningful or aspirational identity. Recent research on

environmental communication in wildlife tourism and metaverse-based destination branding reinforces the importance of narrative framing, affective engagement, and experiential meaning-making in destination communication [25,31]. As a result, the concept remained administratively visible but symbolically weak. The branding potential that green tourism could have carried, particularly in the post-pandemic context, where tourists demonstrated growing interest in health, sustainability, and community-based experience, was therefore largely unrealized. This outcome was not inevitable. Rather, it reflected identifiable choices about communication form, tone, and channel that could, in principle, have been made differently.

The problem of conceptual ambiguity deserves attention in its own right. Green tourism draws its legitimacy from global sustainability frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals [4], yet at the level of local practice its meaning remains unstable [40,44]. In Thailand, this instability was compounded by the persistent semantic overlap between “*green tourism*” and “*eco-tourism*”, terms that are related but distinct, and that carry different implications for policy and practice. The confusion documented in this study has been reported in comparable contexts in Laos, Indonesia, and South Africa [9,11,45], suggesting that it reflects a structural feature of sustainability communication rather than a peculiarity of the Thai case. Communication strategies that fail to address this ambiguity at the outset are likely to reproduce it.

There is, nonetheless, a genuinely promising dimension to the post-pandemic picture. The attitudinal shifts documented in the findings, greater sensitivity to hygiene, sustainability, wellness, and locally grounded experience, resonate with what Fakfare et al. [30] describe as the emergent “New Normal Tourism Ethos.” They also align with recent studies showing that destination brand love, environmental communication, and green destination brand equity can support environmentally responsible tourist behavior [15,22,31]. For communication strategists and destination managers, this represents an opening: The public appetite for sustainable travel has grown, and with it the potential audience for a more expansive and compelling articulation of what green tourism actually entails.

Taken together, these findings suggest that future policy communication should become more inclusive, more carefully segmented, and more closely grounded in local meaning-making. A stronger strategy would begin with conceptual clarification, a clear, accessible definition that distinguishes green tourism from eco-tourism and connects it to its wider sustainability agenda. It would combine digital and offline channels, recognizing that the latter remain essential for reaching populations that are digitally excluded. It would also give local actors, guides, community leaders, and influencers a genuine role not merely in distributing messages but in shaping them, moving from a transmission model of communication to one that is participatory and co-created [14,46]. Such an approach is consistent with recent work emphasizing sustainable destination marketing, co-design, and digital storytelling as mechanisms for building credible and inclusive destination-brand meaning [13,14,25].

6. Conclusion

Green tourism policy in Thailand represents a genuinely ambitious sustainability commitment, one that links environmental stewardship to cultural preservation, community well-being, and economic development. Whether that commitment is realized in practice depends, this study has argued, less on the policy itself than on the institutional, digital, and community-level communication channels through which its meaning is interpreted and circulated. The findings presented here reveal a system in which that architecture is uneven: at the national level, policy meaning is relatively coherent and multi-dimensional, but as it passes through provincial authorities, local tourism operators, and community stakeholders, it often fragments, narrows, and loses much of its original substance. The COVID-19 pandemic did not create this problem; it exposed it and made its consequences harder to ignore. At the same time, it created an opening for rethinking how green tourism might be communicated. The pandemic accelerated changes in what visitors seek, especially in relation to health and safety, less congested travel, community-rooted experiences, and environmentally responsible consumption. This was an opportunity to reposition green tourism as more than environmental conservation alone: it could also encompass health, local cultural authenticity, situational awareness, and community resilience. Capturing that opportunity will require communication strategies that are more systematically inclusive, more clearly segmented across different stakeholder groups, and more closely aligned with the meaning-making practices of local communities. **Table 4** summarizes the policy recommendations that follow from the study's findings.

Table 4. Practical policy recommendations for strengthening green tourism policy communication and destination branding in Thailand

Policy recommendation	Description	Target audience
Clarify and standardize the definition of green tourism	Develop accessible guidelines to clearly distinguish green tourism from ecotourism, reflecting holistic sustainability.	Ministry of Tourism and Sports, Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT)
Enhance stakeholder alignment through capacity-building workshops	Provide training for local tourism actors to implement policy-aligned sustainability practices.	Local governments, community-based tourism operators
Leverage digital influencers and storytelling campaigns	Use digital narratives and influencer engagement to increase public understanding and appeal.	TAT marketing units, private sector tourism boards
Adopt multimodal communication strategies	Integrate online tools with offline outreach (e.g., community radio, local events) to include rural populations.	Local NGOs, subdistrict administrative organizations
Encourage co-creation of destination branding for green tourism	Involve communities in branding activities to promote ownership and relevance.	Community tourism networks, youth groups

Source: Synthesized by the authors

7. Limitations and future research

A limitation of this study is its focus on the time period of the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand. As a result, the patterns identified in communication strategy, stakeholder interpretation, and attitudinal change should be understood in relation to crisis conditions rather than the full tourism cycle. Whether these dynamics persist, fade, or are reconfigured in the post-crisis context is beyond the scope of the present research design. In addition, the study draws on qualitative evidence, documentary

analysis, and stakeholder accounts. These sources are well suited to capturing the texture of meaning, the logic of interpretation, and the differences across actor positions, but they do not support statistically generalizable claims about the wider population of tourists and tourism businesses. These limitations point to several directions for future research. Longitudinal studies examining pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis phases would clarify which dynamics are crisis-specific and which reflect more persistent structural features of tourism communication. Comparative investigations spanning different provinces and countries would enable assessment of the proposed mechanisms' applicability across varied institutional and cultural settings. Furthermore, mixed-method approaches incorporating qualitative research with surveys, social media analysis, or network analysis could more precisely explore the interplay between policy messaging, stakeholder interpretation, and tourist decision-making.

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Informed consent statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the study objectives, interview/focus group procedures, audio recording, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality and anonymization of their responses. Consent was obtained before the interviews and focus group discussions were conducted.

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