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Leadership and Digital Transformation Competency as Catalysts for Green Business Performance: The Mediating Role of Business Innovation in Vietnamese SMEs

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Abstract. This study explored the critical role of leadership and digital transformation competency in enhancing green business performance in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), emphasizing the mediating effect of business innovation. Grounded in Dynamic Capability Theory, the research aimed to address pressing challenges faced by SMEs in aligning sustainability goals with technological advancements and adaptive leadership. A quantitative approach was employed, utilizing data collected from 112 SME managers in Vietnam. The study applied Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to evaluate the proposed relationships. The findings revealed that leadership and digital transformation competency significantly influence green business performance, with business innovation serving as a substantial mediator. These results provide empirical support for the integration of leadership and technological capabilities into organizational strategies to achieve sustainable growth. The study also highlights the necessity for SMEs to foster innovative practices to bridge the gap between sustainability aspirations and operational realities. This research contributes to the literature on dynamic capabilities and sustainability, offering actionable insights for SME managers and policymakers to enhance business performance through innovation-driven strategies. Future research should expand on these findings by exploring longitudinal designs and cross-industry comparisons.

Keywords: leadership, digital transformation competency, green business performance, business innovation, SMES.

1. Introduction

In the modern business landscape, sustainability has emerged as a critical concern for organizations worldwide. The increasing emphasis on environmental responsibility has led firms, particularly Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs), to explore innovative strategies for enhancing their green business performance. SMEs, as vital contributors to economic growth and employment, play a pivotal role in addressing global sustainability challenges (Wakhyuni et al., 2024). However, their limited resources and capabilities often hinder their ability to adopt and implement sustainable practices effectively. Leadership and digital transformation competency have been identified as crucial drivers for overcoming these challenges, enabling SMEs to adapt to dynamic market conditions and achieve sustainability objectives (Satar et al., 2025). Leadership, as a dynamic capability, empowers organizational decision-makers to inspire, guide, and mobilize resources toward achieving strategic goals. Transformational leadership, in particular, fosters innovation and facilitates the integration of sustainable practices across organizational processes (N. V. Dat et al., 2025). Concurrently, the rapid advancement of digital technologies has transformed the competitive landscape, necessitating the development of digital transformation competency among SMEs. This competency enables firms to leverage digital tools and platforms to enhance operational efficiency, foster innovation, and achieve sustainability (Pham et al., 2023). Despite the evident potential of these factors, their combined impact on green business performance remains underexplored, especially in the context of developing economies like Vietnam.

The extant literature highlights the importance of leadership and digital transformation competency in driving organizational performance. Transformational leadership has been extensively studied for its role in fostering innovation and sustainability, particularly in large organizations (Bass & Riggio, 2012). However, limited research has examined its impact within the SME context, where resource constraints and structural limitations often necessitate unique leadership approaches (Khanh et al., 2025). Additionally, while digital transformation has been widely acknowledged as a critical enabler of organizational agility and innovation, its implications for green business performance remain underexplored (Hai et al., 2025). Business innovation has emerged as a key mediator in the relationship between organizational capabilities and performance outcomes. Research suggests that firms with strong innovation capabilities are better equipped to adapt to environmental changes and achieve sustainable growth (Giedrius & Jolanta, 2024). However, the literature has primarily focused on developed economies, leaving a significant gap in understanding how these dynamics unfold in developing countries like Vietnam. Moreover, the interplay between leadership, digital transformation competency, and innovation in driving green business performance requires further empirical investigation.

While transformational leadership has been widely studied in the context of large organizations, its specific impact on green business performance in SMEs remains underexplored. SMEs operate under distinct constraints, including limited financial and human resources, which may influence the effectiveness of leadership strategies. This study addresses this gap by investigating how leadership drives sustainability in resource-constrained environments, providing empirical evidence from Vietnamese SMEs. Although digital transformation competency has been recognized as a critical enabler of organizational performance, its direct and indirect effects on green business performance are not well understood. Existing studies have largely overlooked the mediating role of business innovation in this relationship, particularly in the context of developing economies. By examining this mediation effect, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how digital transformation competency translates into sustainable outcomes. The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the direct effects of leadership and digital transformation competency on green business performance.
2. To analyze the mediating role of business innovation in these relationships.
3. To provide actionable insights for enhancing sustainability practices in Vietnamese SMEs

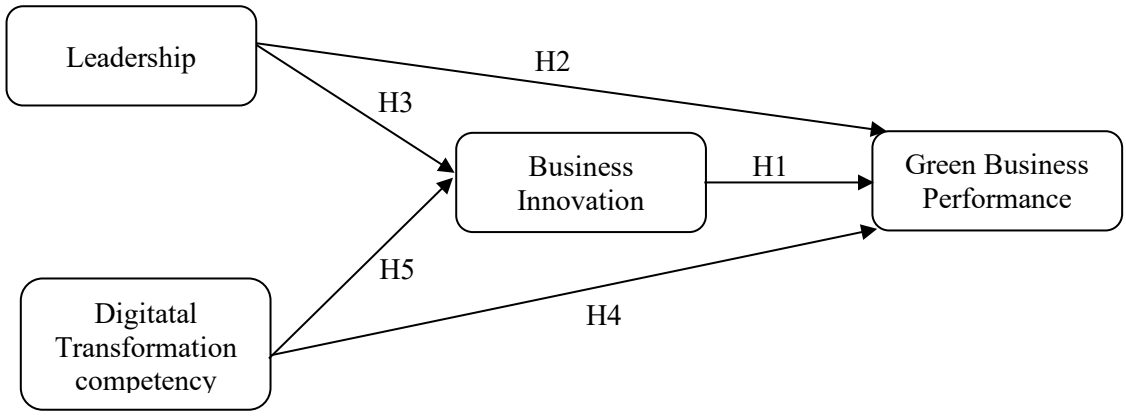
2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical model

Dynamic Capability Theory (DCT) provides the theoretical foundation for this study. Introduced by Teece et al. (1997), DCT emphasizes that a firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies is crucial for sustaining competitive advantage in rapidly changing environments. This framework is particularly relevant in understanding how leadership and digital transformation competency operate as dynamic resources that enable firms to adapt to environmental shifts and achieve superior performance.

Leadership, from the perspective of DCT, is a critical dynamic capability that facilitates organizational learning, resource mobilization, and strategic alignment. Transformational leaders, in particular, play a pivotal role in fostering innovation and sustainability by inspiring employees, promoting collaboration, and encouraging risk-taking (Bass & Riggio, 2012). These characteristics align with the adaptive nature of dynamic capabilities, highlighting leadership as a key driver of green business performance. Similarly, digital transformation competency represents a dynamic resource that enables firms to leverage technology for process optimization, innovation, and sustainability (Khoa & Huynh, 2025). By integrating digital tools and platforms into their operations, firms can enhance their adaptability, improve decision-making, and foster innovation (Vial, 2021). This study conceptualizes digital transformation competency as a critical enabler of dynamic capabilities, facilitating green business performance through its impact on innovation.

Business innovation, as a mediating factor, reflects a firm's ability to develop and implement novel solutions to address emerging challenges. In the context of DCT, innovation serves as a mechanism through which dynamic capabilities translate into performance outcomes (Agyapong et al., 2024). By examining the interplay between these constructs, this study seeks to extend DCT by providing empirical evidence on the relationships between leadership, digital transformation competency, business innovation, and green business performance. The theoretical model was proposed in Figure 1.



2.2. Hypotheses development

Business innovation drives organizational performance by enabling firms to develop and implement novel solutions that address emerging challenges and opportunities. In the context of green business performance, innovation facilitates the adoption of sustainable practices, the development of eco-friendly products, and the optimization of resource utilization (Akhtar et al., 2023). Empirical evidence suggests that firms with strong innovation capabilities are better equipped to achieve sustainability objectives, particularly in resource-constrained environments (Makumbe, 2024). Therefore, it is

hypothesized:

H1: Business innovation positively impacts green business performance in SMEs.

Leadership plays a critical role in shaping organizational culture, fostering innovation, and driving sustainability initiatives. Transformational leaders, in particular, inspire employees, promote collaboration, and encourage the adoption of sustainable practices (Khoa, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). In SMEs, where resource constraints often limit the scope of sustainability efforts, effective leadership can mobilize resources, align organizational goals with sustainability objectives, and enhance green business performance (Bui, 2024). Leadership is a critical enabler of business innovation, particularly in dynamic and uncertain environments. Transformational leaders foster a culture of creativity, encourage risk-taking, and provide the resources and support necessary for innovation (Ullah Khan et al., 2023). In SMEs, effective leadership can overcome resource constraints by promoting collaboration, leveraging external networks, and aligning innovation efforts with strategic goals (Idrees et al., 2023). Based on these insights, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2: Leadership positively impacts green business performance in SMEs.

H3: Leadership positively impacts business innovation in SMEs.

Digital transformation competency enables firms to leverage technology to enhance operational efficiency, foster innovation, and achieve sustainability objectives. By integrating digital tools and platforms into their operations, SMEs can reduce resource consumption, optimize processes, and develop eco-friendly products and services (Vial, 2021). Empirical evidence highlights the role of digital transformation in enhancing organizational adaptability and performance, particularly in the context of sustainability (Khoa & Huynh, 2025). Digital transformation competency facilitates innovation by providing firms with the tools and capabilities necessary to develop and implement novel solutions. By leveraging digital technologies, SMEs can enhance their innovation capabilities, improve decision-making, and respond to emerging market demands (Appio et al., 2021). Research suggests that digital transformation drives innovation by enabling firms to experiment with new business models, optimize processes, and create value for customers (Hai, 2023). Therefore, they are hypothesized:

H4: Digital transformation competency positively impacts green business performance in SMEs.

H5: Digital transformation competency positively impacts business innovation in SMEs.

3. Method

3.1. Measurement scale

This study employed validated measurement scales to operationalize the constructs of leadership (LEA), digital transformation competency (DTC), business innovation (BUI), and green business performance (GBU). All items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"). The use of a 7-point scale enhances the sensitivity of responses and allows for greater variability in data (Khoa, 2021). The scales were adapted to the specific context of Vietnamese SMEs, ensuring cultural and contextual relevance.

Leadership was measured using a 5-item scale adapted from Bass and Avolio (1989)’s transformational leadership inventory. The scale captures the ability of leaders to inspire employees, foster collaboration, and promote innovation (Bui, 2024). Example items include:

- "Our leaders inspire employees to adopt innovative solutions."
- "Leadership in our organization fosters collaboration to achieve sustainability goals."

Digital transformation competency was assessed using a 4-item scale based on Vial (2021). This scale measures the firm's ability to leverage digital tools and technologies for strategic purposes. Example items include:

- "Our organization effectively adopts digital technologies to improve operational efficiency."
- "Managers in our firm are competent in utilizing digital tools to foster innovation."

Business innovation was measured using a 3-item scale adapted from T. V. Dat et al. (2025). This scale captures the firm's ability to develop and implement innovative solutions. Example items include:

- "Our organization frequently develops new products or services to address market needs."
- "We implement innovative practices to enhance our competitiveness."

Green business performance was assessed using a 4-item scale derived from prior studies on sustainability performance (Nguyen Thi Cam & Bui Thanh, 2025). This scale evaluates the firm's success in adopting eco-friendly practices and achieving sustainability goals. Example items include:

- "Our organization has significantly reduced waste and emissions over the past year."
- "We have implemented energy-efficient processes to achieve sustainability objectives."

The adapted scales were pretested with a small sample of SME managers to ensure clarity and relevance. Minor modifications were made based on their feedback to enhance the contextual fit.

3.2. Measurement scale

The study targeted managers of SMEs in Vietnam, as they are directly involved in strategic decision-making and possess insights into the organization's leadership, digital competency, innovation, and sustainability practices. A purposive sampling method was employed to select participants, ensuring that respondents had at least two years of managerial experience and represented diverse industries. A total of 112 SME managers were surveyed, meeting the minimum sample size requirements for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). According to Hair et al. (2021), a sample size of at least 10 times the number of indicators for the most complex construct in the model is sufficient for robust analysis. Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire distributed via email and in-person visits to SMEs in Vietnam. The questionnaire was designed in English and translated into Vietnamese to ensure comprehension. A back-translation process was conducted to maintain the accuracy of the translation. The survey was conducted over a two-month period, with follow-ups to maximize response rates. After initial screening, incomplete and invalid responses were excluded, resulting in a final dataset of 112 usable responses. The dataset was cleaned to ensure accuracy and reliability. Missing data were addressed using mean substitution for items with less than 5% missing responses. Outliers were identified and handled using z-scores, and normality was assessed to ensure the suitability of the data for PLS-SEM analysis.

The demographic characteristics of the 112 respondents are summarized in Table 1. The sample includes managers from SMEs of varying sizes and industries, providing a diverse representation of Vietnam's SME sector.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Respondents

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Firm Size		
Small (10–50 employees)	56	50
Medium (51–250 employees)	56	50
Primary Industry		
Manufacturing	40	35.7
Services	36	32.1
Retail	20	17.9
Technology	16	14.3
Managerial Experience		
2–5 years	48	42.9
6–10 years	40	35.7
11+ years	24	21.4

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR), both of which measure internal consistency. The results in Table 2 indicated that all constructs exceeded the recommended thresholds of 0.7 for Cronbach's Alpha and CR. For example, the construct of Leadership (LEA) demonstrated a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.842 and a CR of 0.891, signifying high internal consistency. Similarly, Digital Transformation Competency (DTC) exhibited a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.823 and a CR of 0.879. Convergent validity, which measures the extent to which indicators of a construct share a high proportion of variance, was confirmed through the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All constructs achieved AVE values above the recommended threshold of 0.5, indicating satisfactory convergent validity. For instance, the AVE for Business Innovation (BUI) was 0.695, while the AVE for Green Business Performance (GBU) was 0.711. These results confirm that the constructs accurately represent their underlying theoretical dimensions.

Table 2: Convergent Validity Results

Construct	**Cronbach's Alpha**	**Composite Reliability (CR)**	**Average Variance Extracted**	**Outer Loadings (Min-Max)**
Leadership (LEA)	0.842	0.891	0.622	0.72–0.85
Digital Transformation (DTC)	0.823	0.879	0.65	0.74–0.87
Business Innovation (BUI)	0.781	0.872	0.695	0.76–0.88
Green Business Performance (GBU)	0.859	0.907	0.711	0.78–0.89

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio and the Fornell-Larcker criterion. The HTMT values for all construct pairs were below the recommended threshold of 0.85, indicating that the constructs were distinct from one another. For example, the HTMT ratio between Leadership and Digital Transformation Competency was 0.71, while the ratio between Business Innovation and Green Business Performance was 0.77. Additionally, the AVE values of each construct exceeded the squared correlations between constructs, further validating the discriminant validity of the measurement model. These results confirm the robustness of the measurement model, allowing for meaningful interpretation of the structural relationships.

Table 3: HTMT Results

Construct Pair	**HTMT Ratio**
Leadership ↔ Digital Transformation	0.71
Leadership ↔ Business Innovation	0.68
Leadership ↔ Green Business Performance	0.72
Digital Transformation ↔ Business Innovation	0.74
Digital Transformation ↔ Green Business Performance	0.79
Business Innovation ↔ Green Business Performance	0.77

The significance of the hypothesized relationships was evaluated using path coefficients, t-values, p-values, and effect sizes (f^2). All hypothesized relationships in Table 4 were found to be statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level, providing strong support for the proposed model. The results are summarized as follows:

- The path coefficient was 0.412 ($t = 6.15$, $p < 0.001$), indicating a significant positive relationship between Business Innovation and Green Business Performance; therefore, hypothesis H1 was accepted. This finding highlights the critical role of business innovation in enhancing green business performance, consistent with prior research emphasizing that innovative practices enable firms to achieve sustainability objectives.

- The path coefficient was 0.287 ($t = 4.04$, $p < 0.001$), providing empirical support for the positive impact of leadership on green business performance; hence, hypothesis H2 was supported. This result aligns with existing literature that underscores the importance of transformational leadership in fostering sustainability practices within SMEs.
- The path coefficient was 0.338 ($t = 5.37$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that leadership significantly influences business innovation; consequently, hypothesis H3 was supported. This finding highlights the role of leaders in creating an organizational culture that encourages creativity and innovation.
- The path coefficient was 0.324 ($t = 5.59$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that digital transformation competency has a strong positive impact on green business performance, and H4 was supported. This result is consistent with prior studies that emphasize the role of digital technologies in driving sustainability outcomes.
- Finally, the path coefficient was 0.448 ($t = 8.29$, $p < 0.001$), indicating a strong positive relationship between Digital transformation competency and business innovation; hence, hypothesis H5 was supported. Digital transformation competency emerged as the most influential predictor of business innovation, reflecting its critical role in enabling firms to develop novel solutions and adapt to dynamic market demands.

Effect sizes were calculated to assess the relative importance of each predictor variable. The relationship between Digital Transformation Competency and Business Innovation exhibited the largest effect size ($f^2 = 0.241$), underscoring the critical role of digital transformation in driving innovation. Similarly, the relationship between Business Innovation and Green Business Performance demonstrated a moderate effect size ($f^2 = 0.212$), highlighting the importance of innovation as a mediator in achieving sustainability outcomes.

Table 4: Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	**Beta**	**Std. Error**	**t-Value**	**p-Value**	**f^2**
H1: BUI → GBU	0.412	0.067	6.15	<0.001	0.212
H2: LEA → GBU	0.287	0.071	4.04	<0.001	0.123
H3: LEA → BUI	0.338	0.063	5.37	<0.001	0.156
H4: DTC → GBU	0.324	0.058	5.59	<0.001	0.178
H5: DTC → BUI	0.448	0.054	8.29	<0.001	0.241
LEA → BUI → GBU	0.139		4.12	<0.001	
DTC → BUI → GBU	0.324		5.59	<0.001	

The explanatory power of the structural model was assessed using R^2, which represents the proportion of variance in the dependent variable explained by the independent variables. The results in Table 5 revealed that Business Innovation (BUI) had an R^2 value of 0.624, indicating that 62.4% of the variance in business innovation is explained by leadership and digital transformation competency. Similarly, Green Business Performance (GBU) had an R^2 value of 0.693, signifying that 69.3% of the variance in green business performance is explained by leadership, digital transformation competency, and business innovation. These findings reflect the strong explanatory power of the proposed model, supporting the theoretical framework of Dynamic Capability Theory. The predictive relevance of the model was assessed using the Q^2 statistic, calculated through the blindfolding procedure. Positive Q^2 values for both BUI (0.482) and GBU (0.538) indicate that the model has substantial predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2021). These results confirm that the structural model reliably predicts the dependent variables.

Table 5: Explanatory Power and Predictive Relevance

Endogenous Construct	**R^2**	**Q^2**
Business Innovation (BUI)	0.624	0.482
Green Business Performance (GBU)	0.693	0.538

4.2. Discussion

This study provides significant insights into how leadership and digital transformation competency influence green business performance through the mediating role of business innovation, specifically within the context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Vietnam. Grounded in Dynamic Capability Theory (DCT), the findings highlight the relevance of dynamic organizational capabilities in addressing sustainability challenges and fostering innovation in resource-constrained environments. The results affirm that leadership plays a crucial role in driving green business performance. Transformational leadership, characterized by its ability to inspire, motivate, and mobilize resources, enables SMEs to align their operations with sustainability goals (Zhang et al., 2025). This finding is consistent with prior studies, such as those by Ullah Khan et al. (2023), which emphasize the importance of leadership in fostering a culture of collaboration and innovation.

Similarly, digital transformation competency emerged as a critical factor for green business performance and innovation (Idrees et al., 2023). By leveraging digital technologies, SMEs can improve operational efficiency, reduce resource consumption, and develop innovative solutions to sustainability challenges. This finding aligns with assertion of Vial (2021) that digital transformation serves as a key enabler of organizational adaptability.

The study also reinforces the mediating role of business innovation in the relationships between organizational capabilities and performance outcomes. Firms with strong innovation capabilities can effectively bridge the gap between leadership and technological competencies, translating them into tangible sustainability achievements (Uyen et al., 2025). This insight extends the work of Chen et al. (2023), who conceptualized innovation as a critical mechanism for dynamic capabilities.

5. Conclusion

This study makes significant theoretical contributions by advancing the application of Dynamic Capability Theory (DCT) in the context of sustainability and innovation within SMEs. Specifically, it highlights the mediating role of business innovation in translating leadership and digital transformation competency into green business performance. By integrating these constructs into a unified framework, the study expands the understanding of how dynamic capabilities operate synergistically to achieve sustainability objectives. Furthermore, it contributes to the literature on transformational leadership by demonstrating its dual role in fostering business innovation and directly influencing green business performance. Similarly, the findings enrich digital transformation research by emphasizing its critical role not only in optimizing operations but also in driving innovation, which serves as a pathway to sustainability. This integration of leadership, digital transformation, and innovation provides a robust theoretical foundation for addressing environmental challenges in resource-constrained environments.
The findings of this study provide valuable insights for SME managers, highlighting the critical roles of leadership, digital transformation competency, and business innovation in achieving green business performance. Managers should prioritize transformational leadership practices to foster a culture of creativity and collaboration, which are essential for driving innovation and sustainability initiatives. Leaders must actively inspire employees to embrace innovative solutions and align organizational efforts with environmental goals. Furthermore, investments in digital transformation technologies, such as automation, data analytics, and cloud computing, are essential for optimizing processes and enabling the development of eco-friendly products and services. By integrating advanced technologies into their operations, SMEs can enhance their resource efficiency, reduce environmental impact, and improve their overall competitiveness in the market.

For policymakers, the study underscores the importance of creating an enabling environment for SMEs to adopt sustainability practices. Governments and regulatory bodies should introduce targeted programs, such as subsidies or tax incentives, to encourage SMEs to invest in digital transformation and innovation. Additionally, leadership development programs, especially those tailored to SME managers, can help equip leaders with the skills needed to drive innovation and align organizational strategies with sustainability objectives. Policymakers should also support initiatives that facilitate knowledge-sharing and collaboration among SMEs, such as industry networks, innovation hubs, and public-private partnerships. These efforts can help SMEs overcome resource constraints and foster a more inclusive, sustainable business ecosystem. By aligning organizational capabilities with sustainability-focused policies, SMEs can thrive while addressing global environmental challenges.

While this study provides valuable insights, certain limitations should be noted. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causality between the constructs. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to explore the dynamic nature of these relationships over time. Second, the sample is limited to Vietnamese SMEs, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Expanding the study to include SMEs from other countries and industries would provide a more comprehensive understanding of these relationships. Moreover, this study focuses on leadership and digital transformation competency as predictors of green business performance. Future research could explore additional mediators or moderators, such as organizational culture, external stakeholder pressure, or environmental regulations, to provide a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing sustainability outcomes

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