

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The impact of residents empowerment on the protection of intangible cultural heritage based on social exchange theory

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ABSTRACT

The use of tourism as a means to revitalize intangible cultural heritage is common in China. A number of studies have confirmed the role of residents' empowerment in the protection of intangible cultural heritage, so it is crucial to promote residents' deep participation in tourism planning and development. This study examines the impact of empowerment on residents' willingness to participate and the protection of intangible cultural heritage, so as to solve the problem of insufficient participation of residents in the protection of intangible cultural heritage. It aims to emphasize the importance of empowerment and the mediating role of willingness to participate. A survey was conducted among 244 residents from 4 intangible heritage towns in Ganzhou City. The results show that empowerment not only has a significant positive impact on residents' willingness to participate in tourism planning and development but also has a positive impact on the protection of intangible cultural heritage. Additionally, empowerment indirectly affects the protection effect of intangible cultural heritage through the mediation of residents' willingness to participate. Based on these findings, three suggestions are put forward: first, the government should learn to listen to the voice of residents, it can involve residents in heritage management decisions, strengthen their control, self-efficacy and emotional connection with intangible cultural heritage. Secondly, we can pass on traditional skills to the younger generation and enhance their cultural identity. Thirdly, economic empowerment has a better effect on residents' participation in tourism planning and development than psychological and social empowerment. Governments should create job opportunities, support the commercialization of folk performances and heritage-related products, and ensure local communities benefit economically from tourism.

Keywords: residents empowerment; residents' willingness; participate in tourism planning and development; intangible cultural heritage protection

1. Introduction

Many articles have confirmed the significance of tourism in heritage conservation. Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is very important for encouraging the growth of the local economic, social and culture environmental development^[1]. Tourism is an effective way to protect ICH. Numerous studies have highlighted the positive economic, social, cultural and environmental impacts of tourism. These benefits include the renovation of recreational facilities, the expansion of leisure activities, an enhanced

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 1 January 2025 | Accepted: 23 January 2025 | Available online: 28 January 2025

CITATION

He J, Mohamad DB. The impact of residents empowerment on the protection of intangible cultural heritage based on social exchange theory. *Environment and Social Psychology* 2025; 10(1): 3343. doi:10.59429/esp.v10i1.3343

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community appearance, increased opportunities for events and shopping, improved preservation of historic buildings and cultural assets and an overall improvement in quality of life^[2-4].

Residents living in ICH sites are very important stakeholders. Recognition of the resource value of ICH by stakeholders, especially the local residents, is critical to the accomplishment of sustainable conservation efforts^[1]. Tourism scholars widely agree that residents play a vital role as key local stakeholders^[5, 6]. It is imperative to increase their voices in decision-making processes^[7-9], as these decisions directly impact their lives the most^[10, 11]. Residents are not only stakeholders of ICH protection but also stakeholders of ICH tourism. For tourist development to occur, local population must be included in the planning process^[12-14].

Research on tourism planning has consistently highlighted the significance of integrating comments from local residents into the decision-making process^[13, 15-17]. Political leaders, developers, and planners need to realize that community people's full participation improves and expedites the planning process rather than impeding it^[12-14]. Tourism planning research has consistently stressed how crucial it is to include local people in the planning phase^[13, 15-17]. To achieve inclusive and sustainable results, residents must actively participate in local decision-making^[18]. Political leaders, developers, and planners must understand that complete community involvement not only supports but also improves the planning process^[2].

Therefore, residents' participation in the planning and development of tourism (TPAD) is particularly important. Depending on the level of participation, participation can be divided into three categories: one is active participation and full participation; Second, passive participation; The third is almost no participation. Through reading a lot of literature and field observation, the participation of local residents in the planning and development of intangible cultural heritage tourism is not ideal.

As stated by Goodwin and Santilli^[19], the primary cause of community tourism projects' failure is the residents' absence. Reid et al.^[20] contended that increased local participation fosters a sustainable approach to community tourism by allowing people to better grasp the important concerns they encounter on a daily basis^[21]. Telfer and Sharpley^[22] note that top-down approaches are commonly employed in developing countries like Nigeria for TPAD^[23]. People now believe that government choices for local towns are predetermined, especially in less developed countries where the growth of tourism is frequently influenced by national government agendas rather than local requirements^[17, 23]. Locals contend that the government only gets involved with them when issues come up with the development of tourism resources. Residents representatives are put in an unfair position by this reactive approach as they are expected to handle problems that frequently result from their initial absence from the planning and development processes^[23]. According to Aleshinloye et al.^[18], most of the respondents had no input in the tourism planning process^[18, 24]. Many of the few residents who grudgingly participate in development initiatives have little influence over oversight efforts and little authority over decision-making^[1, 25, 26].

In developing countries, passive participation and almost no participation dominate. If residents can be empowered with TPAD, they will be more willing to participate in activities related to tourism and the protection of ICH. At least, empowerment opens a channel for residents to participate in the ICH TPAD. Therefore, it is of great significance to study the connection between local people's empowerment and their willingness to take part in the planning and development of ICH resources. Based on studies, empowerment comprises four main dimensions, namely political empowerment, economic empowerment, psychological empowerment, social empowerment. In previous studies, empowerment is one level on the participation ladder, empowerment belongs to the high level of participation. Empowerment is a phenomenon divided by outcome. In developing countries, however, resident tourism empowerment is underperforming, both as a phenomenon and as a cause. Because residents are not empowered, low participation of residents in TPAD,

which affects the effectiveness of ICH preservation. The logical points of this paper are: if residents are given the right to plan and develop tourism, whether residents' participation increase; What types of empowerment, if any, can increase residents' participation in the planning and development of ICH; what can be done to involve more residents in intangible cultural heritage planning and development so as to safeguard ICH?

Tourism clearly contributes positively to the safeguarding of ICH. In developing countries, residents' participation is not high, so how to increase participation and protect ICH is really important. Since many frameworks for evaluating community empowerment were created and improved in developed countries, it is more challenging to adapt them to the circumstances of underdeveloped nations^[23]. More empirical study is required to fill this vacuum in the tourism industry, as Aghazamani and Hunt^[27] noted that most past tourism studies have prioritized looking at empowerment as an outcome rather than a process^[2]. Although community-based tourism (CBT) settings have implemented empowerment paradigm^[28], intangible types of empowerment are still not well understood^[29]. Additionally, involvement in tourist development does not necessarily translate into true empowerment, as noted by Cole^[9] and Gutierrez^[30].

Therefore, based on the study of participation willingness, this study will develop a new research framework from the perspective of empowerment to investigate the elements affecting residents' participation in TPAD and what is the relationship between residents' participation in tourism and empowerment. This paper introduces an empowerment-willing-protection model to illustrate how empowerment affects residents' willingness to participate in ICH protection and how residents' willingness to participate in ICH protection^[30].

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical framework

Social exchange is the voluntary behavior of individuals driven by the expectation of receiving something in return, usually from others^[31]. Social exchange is not strictly economic in the sense that it does not contain explicit obligations^[32]. Social exchange theory (SET) is a sociological theory first proposed by Emerson^[33]. It refers to a bilateral reward process involving two or more social groups^[7]. SET is a theoretical framework to explain the positive and negative perceptions of local residents^[34]. It is based on the voluntary and active participation of both parties in the transaction^[35]. SET is used in tourism research to explain how local residents perceive tourism development^[36, 37]. SET believes that if residents believe that the benefits of tourism development outweigh the costs of development, they will be motivated to communicate and interact with tourists^[38, 39] and will be more inclined to support tourism development^[40].

In the context of intangible cultural heritage protection, SET plays a key role in explaining residents' economic, psychological, social empowerment in shaping residents' willingness to participate in and protect intangible cultural heritage.

According to SET, individuals evaluate the benefits they receive when deciding to participate in a social exchange. Economic empowerment increases the returns of residents, not only stimulates the willingness of residents to participate but also promotes the protection of intangible cultural heritage. In other words, the economic benefits brought by tourism development of intangible cultural heritage can directly encourage residents to pay attention to and protect cultural heritage.

The set also explains the psychological benefits individuals receive from participation, such as pride and a sense of accomplishment. Psychological empowerment increases the perception and personal significance of residents in protecting cultural heritage, which is consistent with the intrinsic rewards emphasized by the

set. Therefore, authorized residents are more likely to actively participate in the planning and development of non-legacy tourism and make intentional contributions to the protection of intangible cultural heritage. This psychological input reflects the internalization of their cultural identity and pride.

Social empowerment strengthens residents' sense of belonging and connection to the community, establishes mutually beneficial relationships, and enhances collective participation in the planning and development of intangible cultural heritage and joint efforts in the protection of intangible cultural heritage. Through social exchanges, residents realize that preserving shared cultural values and traditions benefits both sides.

It posits that economic, psychological, and social empowerment independently and collectively influence residents' willingness to participate in TPAD, which in turn impacts the protection of ICH. Additionally, each form of empowerment has a direct effect on ICH protection, underscoring the multifaceted pathways through which empowerment drives community engagement and ICH protection.

Based on social exchange theory, this study highlights how empowerment can be a catalyst for mobilizing residents to protect cultural heritage. This theoretical perspective emphasizes the importance of creating an empowering environment that maximizes the perceived benefits of participation before it occurs, thereby facilitating the practice of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

2.2. Participation

2.2.1. The concept of participation

Arnstein^[41] defines participation as a goal based on the redistribution of power^[30]. According to^[42], participation is an empowerment process that encourages local residents to be involved in all forms of advocacy planning, decision-making, and execution^[30].

2.2.2. Tourism participation

The method by which people of the local residents take part in decision-making is known as tourism participation in planning and development^[43]. Their knowledge of local culture is valuable in development planning (Healey, 1998). In addition to participating in political decisions, participation in tourism is also defined as community participation in deriving benefits from tourism activities^[30, 44].

2.2.3. Ladder of participation

Arnstein^[41] categorized community participation into three categories and eight ladders: these are manipulative participation, civic symbolism, and civic power^[1]. Pretty^[45] divided participation into seven levels: manipulative or passive, consultative, contributing resources, functional, interactive, and self-mobilization^[23]. Combined with the definition of participation Arnstein^[41], Pretty^[45] and Tosun^[17, 46], the three types of community participation in TPAD are coercive, induced, spontaneous participation^[1].

2.3. Empowerment

2.3.1. The concept of empowerment

The concept of empowerment stems from Rappaport^[47]. He believes that empowerment is the process of ensuring authority over individual life and residents' participation in community life through a system of democratic participation^[18]. Chin et al.^[2] and Rappaport^[2, 47] defines empowerment as the authority that individuals, organizations, and communities have over their affairs. Ahmad and Talib argues that empowerment is a collective act involving all the inhabitants^[30].

2.3.2. Empowerment in tourism

The empowerment of residents in tourism is a common research direction in current tourism development research. It aims to reduce inequalities due to gender, status, wealth and is in line with the current concept of sustainable tourism^[18]. Empowerment often implies a transfer of power from the government or the tourism enterprise to residents, mediated by tourism participation^[13,29]. The evolution of empowerment in the tourism literature is best reflected by research^[27]. Aghazamani and Hunt^[27] note that empowerment can provide greater autonomy, freedom, and control to individuals or collectives, it encompasses multiple dimensions, and it can be dynamically adjusted through the environment. In tourism activities, residents can enhance their standard of living by participating^[18]. Tourism empowerment involves empowering residents with decision-making, autonomy, control. It can improve the working efficiency, credibility, confidence of stakeholders, and can make stakeholders more contractual^[2, 48, 49].

One of the primary motivations for analyzing residents' participation and community empowerment is that TPAD should support the development of local communities. When locals participate in the tourism projects and are able to voice their wishes and needs for the development project, the prosperity of the growth of tourism can be expected. The concept of empowerment is important for often marginalized local populations and is also critical to the extent to which residents benefit from tourism development. Local residents can only profit from the existing tourism resources if they are empowered and involved^[23].

Top-down decision-making and planning methods are contrary to empowerment itself. Currently, bottom-up empowerment methods are advocated, because local vulnerable groups and poor people can take an active role in the planning and development of tourism^[50]. The growth of tourism can be regulated by governments, the commercial sector, and empowered communities^[46, 51, 52]. In a significant way, if participation is a type of resident' participation, then empowerment is an agency for the community to express its ideas^[23]. In tourism, resident empowerment can be studied from economic, psychological, social, and political aspects^[2, 53, 54]. Moswete and Lacey^[55] summarized several kinds of literature on empowerment and pointed out that the dimensions of empowerment range from two to six. The four most commonly used dimensions of empowerment are economic, psychological, social, and political^[56]. Both community psychology and tourism studies make use of these dimensions^[18].

2.3.3. Dimensions of empowerment

a) Economic empowerment

Most research on economic empowerment has centered on the economic advantages of tourism to local residents and communities. It includes fair allocation of financial advantages ^[57, 58] job creation, community control of economic benefits, and minimizing leakage of tourism revenues to guarantee that these economic benefits remain within the community^[18, 59]. Economic empowerment leads to poverty reduction by enhancing individual freedom and significantly improving quality of life^[16, 18, 60]. In developing countries, it is critical that local communities and people with access to tourism resources are economically empowered^[23].

b) Psychological empowerment

Psychological empowerment is known as the positive capacity within a community to bring about social and political change through collective action^[10, 23, 61]. As stated by Scheyvens^[16], psychological empowerment occurs when the four conditions of local residents and communities believing in their own abilities, having hope for the future of TPAD, being proud of local traditions and culture, and being self-reliant are met^[23].

Psychological empowerment is often seen as a dynamic, ongoing participatory process. It can promote greater democratic participation by residents and can also enhance residents' pride and self-esteem^[18, 47, 56]. The well-being, self-esteem, confidence, and happiness of the local population are a more conventional part of the discussion of regional development^[61]. Psychological empowerment has naturally become a studied part of local community tourism development^[23].

Residents' belief in their ability to contribute effectively and fairly to TPAD is also linked to psychological empowerment^[16, 23]. Many people tend to overlook the psychological empowerment that originates from pride and self-worth^[12, 29]. In tourism development, when residents and community members become disillusioned, disaffected and confused, it means that they are not psychologically empowered^[12, 23, 62].

c) Social empowerment

Social empowerment refers to situations in which the cohesion and integrity of a community is confirmed or strengthened through collective activities^[16, 18]. Social empowerment comes from community unity and residents' self-awareness^[12, 29]. Social empowerment are evident when local communities receive other development projects through formal or informal employment, business opportunities, or tourism development^[16, 23].

When an entire community, not just a few, benefits from tourism development, this is very clear social empowerment. In addition, it is also very clearly empowering when the money made from tourism is utilized to fund social projects such as medical care for residents, water facilities, or local communities^[16, 23]. The development of tourism is based on the resources of the local community, and some projects may restrict residents' access to resources that are normally available to them^[62]. Once this happens, locals are unable to derive significant benefits from such development, which means that residents are dis-empowered^[23, 62].

2.4. Empowerment and willingness to participate

Previous studies have confirmed that empowerment can lead to active support for tourism initiatives and more eagerness to take part in TPAD, thus successfully carrying out tourism activities^[30, 63]. Boley et al.^[7] believes empowerment is a major factor influencing locals' enthusiasm. His findings suggest that psychological empowerment directly and positively influences travel support and participation^[18, 64]. Chin et al.^[2] confirmed that those residents who experienced the greatest economic gains and sociocultural advances, i.e., those who gained economic and social empowerment, were more likely to support tourism. Future studies should build on previous studies and examine how residents' willingness to participate in tourism planning and development for tourism is influenced by empowerment^[18, 63, 64]. Therefore, on the basis of the hypothesis argument, this study puts up the following hypotheses:

H1. Residents' economic empowerment positively impacts residents' willingness to participate in TPAD.

H2. Residents' psychological empowerment positively impacts residents' willingness to participate in TPAD.

H3. Residents' social empowerment positively impacts residents' willingness to participate in TPAD.

2.5. Empowerment and protection of ICH

The research proves that the empowered residents are more active and attach more importance to the protection of local tourism resources, that is, the ICH studied in this study, and the protection effect of ICH is also better. This study believes that there is a significant positive correlation between empowerment and ICH protection. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed in this study:

H4. Residents' economic empowerment positively impacts the protection of ICH.

H5. Residents' psychological empowerment positively impacts the protection of ICH.

H6. Residents' social empowerment positively impacts the protection of ICH.

2.6. Willingness to participate and protection of intangible cultural heritage

With the emphasis on ICH and tourism, non-body inspection has become a crucial link in tourism activities, the tourism experience has become richer and more meaningful^[65], and the desire of local residents to participate has become more and more strong^[66]. The addition of ICH projects or ICH tourism in tourism can promote community participation, thereby protecting ICH and promoting sustainable local tourism development^[29].

When marginalized groups such as the impoverished and the young have the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the planning process^[29, 67], who are essential to initiating tourism development plans and intangible heritage conservation^[10, 23, 44]. Based on the existing research, we assume that participation intention plays an intermediary role between authorization and intangible heritage protection. Therefore, this study hypothesizes:

H7. Residents' willingness to participate in TPAD positively impacts the protection of ICH.

H8. Residents' willingness to participate in TPAD mediates residents' empowerment and the protection of ICH.

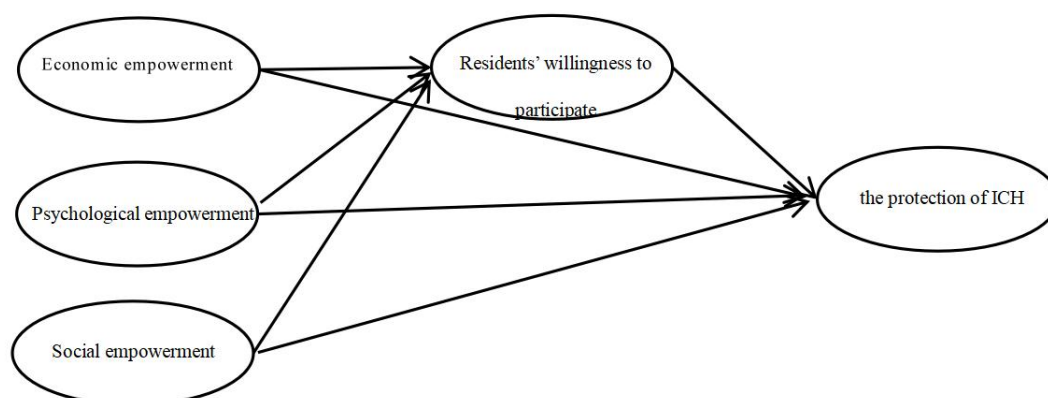


Figure 1. Conceptional framework.

3. Methods

3.1. Study location

Ganzhou, also known as Gannan, is the largest and most populous prefecture-level city in Jiangxi Province. Ganzhou occupies a total area of 39,379.64 square kilometers and is situated in the southern part of Jiangxi Province. The registered population of the city was 9,707,800 at the end of 2016. Ganzhou City has convenient transportation, and there are 4 well-known tourism brands: Red Old Capital, Jiangnan Song City, Hakka Cradle, and ecological Ganzhou. There are many intangible cultural heritages, Ganzhou has 168 folk ICH items above the municipal level, so it is the general trend to develop intangible cultural heritage tourism.

3.2. Data collection

In the study, we chose as large a sample as possible. The G*Power method is a commonly used tool for evaluating the sample size^[68]. In this study, under the premise that the statistical power was 95%, the

medium effect size was 0.15 [69], and the significance level was 0.3%, the numerical values were input to G* power for calculation, and the results showed that there were at least 149 observed values.

Before the data collection, 10 local people were found for a pilot study to reduce measurement error and find problems that may exist in the questionnaire[70]. Cronbach's Alpha is also known as the reliability coefficient, internal consistency coefficient, or this value is generally greater than 0.7. It is verified that Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of each measurement dimension in the pretest is greater than 0.8. The questionnaire passed the reliability test with good reliability.

Data was collected between October and December 2024 using both face-to-face paper and online questionnaires. The sample for this study was carefully selected to ensure the validity and generalizability of the findings. The target population includes the indigenous residents who have been living in these four intangible heritage towns for a long time, especially the residents who are more concerned about the development of residential areas, because they are the main stakeholders of heritage protection. Before answering the questionnaire, participants were made aware of the anonymity of the poll, and that the results were used only for research purposes and would not reveal any privacy of the respondents. A total of 260 questionnaires were issued and 244 valid questionnaires were collected.

3.3. Measurement scale development

The questionnaire is divided into four parts: (i) demographic information, (ii) the impact of empowerment on participation, (iii) the impact of participation on the protection of ICH, and (iv) the impact of empowerment on the protection of ICH.

The scale used was previously validated by relevant literature and is applicable to less developed countries. Among them, 12 items of empowerment are adapted from[18, 24, 71-75]; 3 items of willingness to participate are adapted from[21, 76, 77]; the 3 items of intangible cultural heritage protection are adapted from[78, 79].

4. Results

The SPSS v.26 statistical analysis program was used for data tabulation, the creation of the demographic profile, and the initial reliability analysis through Cronbach's alpha.

Initially, reliability analysis and descriptive statistics were conducted using IBM SPSS v.26. And then, To assess for common method bias, all variables were loaded into a single factor in exploratory factor analysis using Harman's single-factor test. Finally, mediation analysis was conducted using bootstrapping.

4.1. Descriptive analyses

In the descriptive statistics, the standard deviation ranged from 0.767 to 0.923 with the average value varied between 3.86 to 4.10.

Table 1. This is a descriptive statistics.

Constructs/Variable/Indicators	Factor Loadings	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)
economic		4.03	.660	.822	
economic1	.766	4.10	.836		
economic2	.586	3.97	.874		
economic3	.562	4.07	.767		
economic4	.726	4.01	.791		

Constructs/Variable/Indicators	Factor Loadings	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)
psychological		3.96	.769	.878	
psychological1	.734	4.05	.861		
psychological2	.802	3.93	.898		
psychological3	.681	3.91	.923		
psychological4	.740	3.94	.914		
social		3.97	.708	.875	
social1	.776	4.00	.801		
social2	.700	4.00	.839		
social3	.717	3.95	.845		
social4	.778	3.95	.832		
willing		3.95	.754	.837	
willing1	.762	3.93	.893		
willing2	.723	3.97	.855		
willing3	.785	3.95	.857		
protection		3.96	.740	.855	
protection1	.824	4.02	.804		
protection2	.763	4.00	.814		
protection3	.757	3.86	.899		
Total				.922	.908

Table 1. (Continued)

4.2. Reliability analyses

Next, a reliability test is needed to verify the internal consistency of each factor measurement item. Previous studies[80-82]indicate that Cronbach's Alpha is often used to represent reliability. [83] believes that a coefficient greater than or equal to 0.7 is reliable, and a coefficient greater than or equal to 0.6 is acceptable in the early stages of research. In this study, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of all dimensions ranged from 0.822 to 0.878, and the reliability of the total table was 0.922 (see **Table 1**), indicating that the variables had a strong correlation with their respective factor groups and had internal consistency, and the reliability test passed. The reliability test's criteria are met.

4.3. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and validity analyses

The first step is to assess the factorability of 18 items on the scale. The results showed that the correlation between all 18 items and at least one other item was at least 0.562, above 0.5, indicating a reasonable factor. If the factor load of the item in the common factor is less than 0.5, it means that the item is not closely related to the general table, and the homogeneity is low and can be considered deleted. In the second column of the component matrix, the factor load is equivalent to the regression weight in the regression analysis. The larger the value of the factor load, the larger the factor load represents the regression weight in the item and the common factor. Each project shares a common variance with the others. Principal component analysis was then conducted on 18 items to ascertain the dimensions of empowerment, resulting in five distinct domains. **Table 2** presents the descriptors and their corresponding alpha reliability coefficients. The KMO sampling adequacy measure should be higher than 0.6 for good factor analysis

(Kaiser, 1970, 1974; Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989, 2007). The KMO value of this study was 0.908, and the Bartlett sphericity test had statistical significance ($\chi^2 (244) = 2471.935, p = 0.000$).

The fourth step, Harman proposed Harman’s single-factor test was used to examine the potential for common method bias. According to Podsakoff et al., the variance for a single-component explanation should be less than 50%. The results indicated no significant issue with common method variance, as one component explained 43.262% of the variance. This level of variation meets the criteria of being less than 50%. In the fifth step, according to the eigenvalue criterion (greater than 1), a total of 5 significant factors were identified, explaining 73.228% of the variance. Judging from these indicators, factor analysis is considered suitable for these 18 projects (**Table 2**).

When the accumulated explanatory variation of extracted common factors can reach more than 60%, it means that the common factors are reliable.

Table 2. The component matrix after rotation.

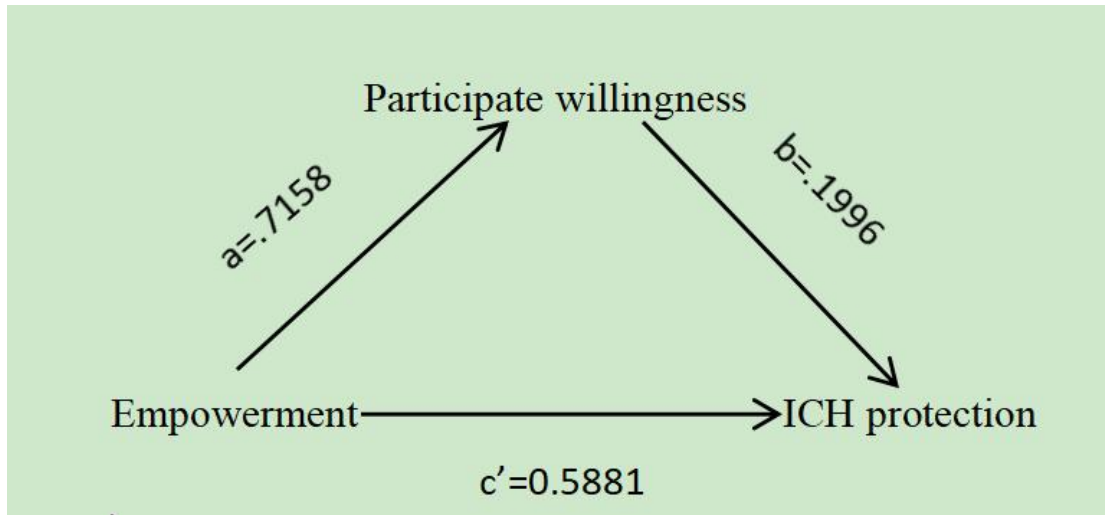
Items	Ingredient				
	1	2	3	4	5
Tourism planning and development can boost the local economy.			.800		
Tourism planning and development can increase residents' income and improve life quality.			.668		
Tourism planning and development can create more jobs opportunities.			.624		
It is possible to divide tourism-related income fairly and sensibly among the government, community residents and scenic spots.			.771		
Tourism planning and development can make local residents feel proud of their customs and increase self-confidence.	.816				
Tourism planning and development can improve the happiness index of local residents.	.814				
Local residents are willing to participate in local tourism education and training.	.755				
Tourism planning and development can make local people aware of the importance of folklore and voluntarily participate in the preservation of local culture.	.767				
Tourism planning and development can increase opportunities for local residents to exchange and cooperate with their neighbors.		.837			
Tourism planning and development can enhance the sense of responsibility of local residents and the cohesion of communities.		.767			
With tourism planning and development, the social status of local residents has improved.		.701			
Tourism planning and development can significantly enhance the local environment.		.823			
I would like to participate in the meetings about tourism planning and development in intangible cultural heritage.					.792
I would like to participate in regular events about tourism planning and development in intangible cultural heritage.					.767
I would like to be a member of the tourism planning and development committee.					.841
Ganzhou's intangible cultural heritage can be protected through intangible cultural heritage tourism planning and development.				.831	
Ganzhou intangible cultural heritage can be inherited through intangible cultural heritage tourism planning and development.				.797	

Items	Ingredient				
	1	2	3	4	5
Ganzhou intangible cultural heritage can be promoted through intangible cultural heritage tourism planning and development.					.786

Table 2. (Continued)

4.4. Hypotheses testing results

To explore the underlying mechanism of the significant positive effect of empowerment on ICH protection, the study further introduces participate willingness as a mediator variable into the structural equation model. Mediation effect testing was conducted using Model 4 in the SPSS macro program PROCESS, following Hayes' bootstrap method to verify participate willingness to mediate role between empowerment and ICH protection. The path coefficient of participation between empowerment and ICH protection is shown in the **Figure 2**.



*** $P < 0.001$ ** $P < 0.01$ * $P < 0.05$

Figure 2. conceptual framework and results.

The empirical results of this study support a significant positive correlation between the empowerment of local residents and the protection of ICH ($\beta = 0.1623$, $p = 0.000$). The graphic above makes it quite evident that residents' willingness to participate partially mediates the relationship between residents' empowerment and ICH protection.

The results provide strong empirical support for the conceptual framework grounded in SET, as all hypothesized relationships were statistically significant. Based on the findings, the influence of economic empowerment on the protection of ICH is ($\beta = .5438$, $p = 0.000$). The influence of psychological empowerment on the protection of ICH is ($\beta = .2816$, $p = 0.000$) The influence of social empowerment on the protection of ICH is ($\beta = .3464$, $p = 0.000$). The influence of economic empowerment on residents' participation intention is ($\beta = .5986$, $p = 0.000$), and the influence of psychological empowerment on residents' participation intention is ($\beta = .4382$, $p = 0.000$). The influence of social empowerment on residents' participation intention is ($\beta = .4534$, $p = 0.000$). (See in **Table 3**)

The bootstrap 95% confidence intervals for the direct effect of X on Y and the mediation effect of M do not contain 0, indicating that X has both a direct effect on Y and a mediating effect through M. The direct

effect was 0.5881 and the intermediate effect was 0.1429 (See **Table 4**), accounting for 80.45% and 19.55% of the total effect of 0.7310, respectively.

Table 3. Fitting index and coefficient significance.

equation of regression (N=244)		Fitting index			Coefficient significance	
outcome variable	predictive variable	R	R ²	F	B	t
Y	X	.5833	.3402	124.7685	.7310	11.1700***
M	X	.5599	.3134	110.4865	.5599	10.5113***
Y	X	.6072	.3687	70.3638	.4692	7.5962***
	M				.2037	3.2970**

Table 4. Effect

	Bootstrap95% CI				
	effect size	Se	LLCI	ULCI	%
total effect:c	.7310	.0654	.6021	.8599	100%
direct effect:c'	.5881	.0774	.4356	.7406	80.45%
mediating effect	.1429	.0500	.0326	.2247	19.55%

$a*b=c-c'$. $a=.7158$, $b=.1996$, $c=.7310$, $c'=.5881$

The study findings indicate that economic empowerment, psychological empowerment and social empowerment of local residents have a significant positive impact on their tourism participation and the protection of ICH.

4.5. Mediation analysis

The study further examined the mediating role of local residents' participation willingness in TPAD, economic, psychological, and social empowerment, in the relationship between non-material cultural heritage protection and economic, psychological, and social empowerment. Clearly, local residents' participation willingness in TPAD significantly mediates the relationship between empowerment and ICH protection.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to propose and validate models that link economic, psychological, and social empowerment to tourism participation willingness and ICH protection. The results provide strong empirical support for the conceptual framework grounded in SET, as all hypothesized relationships were statistically significant. As residents gain more power economically, socially and politically, they are more inclined to participate in tourism-related activities locally. These findings align with those presented by^[29], indicating a stronger effect on ICH protection.

The tourism literature has successfully demonstrated once again that the participation of local residents is necessary for TPAD, and can improve the integration of tourism resources in heritage sites. These results confirm the findings of ^[21]. These results are consistent with social exchange theory, which states that individuals are more likely to engage in activities that provide perceived benefits. Economic empowerment provides financial incentives, psychological empowerment enhances self-efficacy, and social empowerment enhances community communication - each of which increases the perceived rewards of participation.

Similarly, empowerment not only promotes participation but also directly contributes to the effectiveness of intangible heritage conservation. Economic empowerment can ensure income stability and encourage long-term commitment to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, while psychological and social empowerment can strengthen cultural identity and collective responsibility, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Given the significant direct effects of empowerment on both participation intention and ICH protection, residents' willingness to participate is likely to serve as a mediating factor. This supports the idea that empowerment influences ICH protection both directly and indirectly.

This paper provides an empirical basis for the TPAD of Ganzhou ICH sites by using the empowerment scale. According to the study, the findings indicate local residents' willingness to participate in TPAD, as well as their determination to protect ICH. Residents hope that tourism can develop rapidly and drive their economy. The local population is hungry for empowerment and more concerned about psychological empowerment. Therefore, the management department can fully respect the ideas and opinions of residents in the stage of TPAD, and make use of the identity granted to non-genetic inheritors and ICH protectors to give residents psychological satisfaction. Economic effects can also be used to encourage the participation of residents in the process of safeguarding ICH. By demonstrating these significant relationships, the findings reinforce the core argument of Social Exchange Theory: individuals engage in cultural heritage preservation when they perceive tangible and intangible benefits from their participation.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Theoretical implications

While SET is widely used in tourism and community involvement research, its application to ICH protection and residents' empowerment remains underexplored. This study advances the theory by demonstrating that different dimensions of empowerment (economic, psychological, and social) act as key exchange mechanisms that motivate residents' participation in cultural heritage protection. The findings provide empirical evidence that empowerment enhances residents' perceived benefits, reinforcing their willingness to engage in ICH preservation efforts.

6.2. Policy recommendations

First, it is important to cultivate residents' confidence and sense of belonging in the protection of intangible cultural heritage. Local governments can be encouraged to involve residents in the key decision-making process of heritage management, which can enhance their sense of control and self-efficacy, and can also enhance residents' emotional connection with ICH. Strengthen the application of non-inherited projects, transfer traditional skills and knowledge of intangible cultural heritage to the younger generation, so as to cultivate the sense of belonging of the younger generation and protect intangible cultural heritage.

Second, policymakers and governments must additionally concentrate on building social empowerment of residents through local meetings, psychological empowerment by listening to their pressing concerns about ICH preservation and tourism, and subsequent political empowerment by listening to their issues and concerns and promoting good ideas. This not only helps to empower local residents but also attracts new tourists through initiatives like this.

Third, governments and policymakers must create jobs for local residents, as economic empowerment has a better effect on residents' participation in tourism. This can not only strengthen the economic power of local residents, but also help improve their life quality. It can also encourage the commercialization of folk performances and heritage-related products to create jobs and ensure that local residents benefit from tourism

development, making ICH conservation more economically viable and motivating people to participate in ICH conservation in the long term.

7. Limitations and future research directions

Future studies should also assess the level of empowerment, participation and effectiveness of the residents in safeguarding the ICH while taking into account the inclusion of their demographic details including age, gender, education and household income in safeguarding the ICH.

There is a significant positive correlation between the degree of empowerment of local residents and the protection of ICH. Future research could examine whether it has a moderating effect on current relationships.

According to sustainable tourism theory and social exchange theory, TPAD should be a collaborative effort between local residents, tourism operators, government officials and other stakeholders. Future research could try to be based on surveys of tour operators and government officials. We can also use the interview method to conduct relevant research on the local population in order to understand the residents' thoughts more deeply. In terms of participation, tourism jobs, jobs directly related to tourism and non-tourism jobs can also be set to distinguish the participation level.

Author contributions

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Acknowledgments

Here, you can acknowledge any support given which is not covered by the author contribution or funding sections. This may include administrative and technical support, or do-nations in kind (e.g., materials used for experiments).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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