



Do residents really care to be empowered? Prioritizing empowerment through importance performance analysis[☆]

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ABSTRACT

While there is near unanimous agreement that for tourism to be considered sustainable, residents need to be empowered, few researchers have asked residents which dimensions of empowerment should be prioritized. This research seeks to fill this gap and give residents a voice in sharing their empowerment priorities by conducting an Importance Performance Analysis using the Resident Empowerment through Tourism Scale within the nature-based tourism destination of Brevard, located in Transylvania County, NC, USA. Results found residents to be generally apathetic towards empowerment, with psychological, social, political, and economic empowerment all falling in the “Low Priority” quadrant when using a scale-centered approach. However, when using a data-centered technique, “Economic Empowerment” and “Political Empowerment” fell into the “Concentrate Here” quadrant. However, “Social Empowerment” landed in the “Possible Overkill” quadrant, and “Psychological Empowerment” landed in the “Keep up the Good Work” quadrant. Results suggest that tourism managers within Brevard should focus on coordinated efforts to improve resident involvement and access to decision-making, and better distribute or highlight the economic benefits tourism brings to the county. If researchers and practitioners really care about empowering residents, more research is needed to identify residents’ empowerment priorities and benchmark how well destinations are performing on those priorities.

1. Introduction

Empowerment is a mantra within the sustainable tourism literature (Aleshinloye et al., 2022; Boley et al., 2014; Cole, 2006; Sofield, 2003), and rightfully so as Choi and Murray (2010) acknowledge that it is hard to consider tourism sustainable if residents are not empowered. This desire to empower residents stems from the close connections between empowerment and sustainability. For example, McCool and Lime’s (2001, p.385) definition of sustainable tourism heavily focuses on “enhancing the welfare of those affected by it, through increased economic opportunity, preservation of the local community’s cultural and natural heritage, and an enhanced quality of life.” and Aghazamani and Hunt’s (2017, p. 343) definition of empowerment in tourism reads “Empowerment is a multidimensional, context dependent, and dynamic process that provides humans, individually or collectively, with greater agency, freedom, and capacity to improve their quality of life as a function of engagement with the phenomenon of tourism.” Stemming

from this close connection between resident empowerment and sustainable tourism, a host of studies have been written on the topic, essentially cementing resident empowerment as a central tenet of sustainable tourism (Park et al., 2024; Scheyvens, 1999; Scheyvens & van der Watt, 2021).

While there are literally hundreds of studies on empowerment within the sustainable tourism literature, the question of ‘Do residents really care about being empowered?’ has not been asked. Almost all empowerment studies have focused on measuring the outcomes of empowerment rather than its value to those who are supposed to be empowered by tourism. The importance of resident empowerment has mostly been an assumption tourism academics have taken at face value without investigating or questioning if empowerment is really important to residents or if residents really care to be empowered. This question is especially necessary as 1) Scheyvens (1999) conceptualizes empowerment as being multidimensional, covering economic, psychological, social, and political dimensions, 2) there is a likelihood that some

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aspects of empowerment are relatively more important than others, and 3) some destinations are likely to perform better on some dimensions of empowerment than others. These assertions imply that there will be aspects of resident empowerment that destinations should prioritize and others that are less of a priority. Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) only have so much time and capacity, so having residents share the areas in which they desire to be empowered will not only save them time and resources but actually empower residents and help them become “masters over their own affairs” (Rappaport, 1987, p. 122). After all, if residents are driving the empowerment process and sharing their needs and wants regarding empowerment, residents are essentially decolonizing the empowerment process rather than depending on outside academics or DMOs to set the empowerment priorities for the community.

With this gap in mind, this research uses Martilla and James’ (1977) Importance Performance Analysis (IPA), which visually pairs importance and performance responses, to gauge which dimensions of empowerment residents prioritize and identify areas where DMOs are doing well and should “Keep Up The Good Work” in regards to empowerment, areas they need to “Concentrate On,” areas of “Low Priority,” and areas of “Potential Overkill.” This approach is applied to survey data recently collected from residents in the tourism destination of Brevard, North Carolina, USA. This type of analysis provides DMOs with information on where to focus empowerment initiatives based on resident feedback rather than academic assumptions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Empowerment in the tourism literature

The tourism literature has long had an emphasis on resident attitudes towards tourism, with studies from the 1970s and 1980s acknowledging the importance of including resident perspectives towards tourism (Belisle & Hoy, 1980; Liu et al., 1987; Pizam, 1978). However, these studies primarily focused on maximizing the positive and negative impacts of tourism, and it was not until the late 1990s and early 2000s that the concept of resident empowerment emerged within the resident attitude literature as an important concept (Cole, 2006; Scheyvens, 1999; Sofield, 2003).

The concept of empowerment emerged from the psychology literature, with Rappaport (1987) defining empowerment as “mastery over one’s affairs.” Scheyvens (1999) blended this literature with the community development literature on empowerment (Friedmann, 1992) to describe what empowerment would look like in an ecotourism context. Scheyvens’ (1999) seminal article discusses how residents of tourism destinations can be empowered or disempowered by tourism across the four domains of psychological empowerment, social empowerment, political empowerment, and economic empowerment. These four domains closely resemble Weber’s Theory of Formal and Substantive Rationality, where people’s actions are guided by both their formal motives—primarily guided by economic concerns—and their substantive motives, which cover non-economic factors such as their values, social relationships, and quality of life (Boley et al., 2014; Kalberg, 1980).

Economic empowerment, a largely formal measure of empowerment, focuses on how tourism contributes to improving residents’ financial situation (Scheyvens, 1999), and specifically brings attention to how tourism may provide a stable income that can lift residents out of poverty. Items measuring economic empowerment include tourism’s ability to benefit residents over the long-term, help them financially support their families, and improve their standard of living. Dos Santos et al. (2024) found economic empowerment to have a significant and positive relationship with resident support for sustainable tourism. Relatedly, much of the resident attitude literature has found resident perceptions of the economic benefits of tourism to have a significant and positive impact on resident support for tourism (Boley et al., 2018;

Madrigal, 1993). Thus, residents’ economic empowerment through tourism is an important outcome for both tourism academics and DMOs to consider.

Psychological, social, and political empowerment are what Weber would label as more substantive domains of empowerment, where the emphasis is on how tourism helps residents gain mastery over their own psychological health, social relationships within the community, and political affairs. Psychological empowerment specifically focuses on tourism’s ability or inability to raise resident pride and self-esteem through tourism showcasing unique natural and cultural assets of one’s community (Scheyvens, 1999). Psychologically empowered residents feel valued and believe their community’s natural and cultural assets are worth sharing and protecting. Psychological empowerment has repeatedly been found to be a strong substantive predictor of resident support tourism across many destinations around the world (Boley et al., 2014; Strzelecka et al., 2017).

Social empowerment switches the attention away from the pride and self-esteem of residents towards the cohesion or disruption within the community from tourism. A community is socially empowered by tourism when it helps residents feel more connected to one another and when residents increasingly work together to solve problems. Conversely, a community would be socially disempowered if tourism resulted in fighting and increased factions within the community. Like psychological empowerment, social empowerment has also been a consistent predictor of resident support for tourism within the literature (Boley et al., 2014; Strzelecka et al., 2017).

Lastly, political empowerment refers to tourism’s ability or inability to provide residents with a seat at the tourism decision-making table. Political empowerment shares many similarities with the sustainable tourism literature’s emphasis on participatory governance mechanisms branded under the concepts of co-management and co-governance (Rahman et al., 2022; Rojas, Boley, Mach, & Abrams, 2023). However, political empowerment has a concrete scale to measure resident perceptions towards their inclusion in the tourism planning process, while quantitative measures towards resident perspectives of co-management or co-governance are lacking (Boley et al., 2014). When residents are politically empowered, they have a vote and feel their opinions towards tourism development are considered. While the other domains of empowerment have been shown to influence resident support for tourism, political empowerment’s influence over resident support for tourism has long been hypothesized but has yet to materialize as a strong antecedent to support for tourism within resident attitude studies (Maruyama et al., 2016; Strzelecka et al., 2017). Even though political empowerment is a pillar of the sustainable tourism literature, one reason for its limited influence over resident support for tourism is that it could be taken for granted by residents. Additionally, residents could deem it relatively less important to be politically empowered compared to other more pressing empowerment domains, such as economic and psychological empowerment, even though these domains are often related. These reasons are exactly why the application of IPA is needed to understand the importance residents place on different empowerment domains and the destination’s relative performance on these domains.

2.2. Empowerment as a process vs. outcome

Resident empowerment through tourism has been studied within the literature as both a process and an outcome. The benefits of an outcome-based approach to empowerment are that one can measure residents’ perceptions of empowerment and assess how tourism destinations perform on the dimensions of empowerment. An outcome-based approach also allows for modeling the antecedents and outcomes of empowerment, as acknowledged by Aleshinloye et al. (2022). Various studies have taken this approach and have found residents’ place attachment (Strzelecka et al., 2017), knowledge (Joo et al., 2020), and involvement (Aleshinloye et al., 2022) to all be antecedents to resident empowerment. The outcomes of empowerment have also been heavily

studied, showing that residents who are empowered are more likely to view the impacts of tourism more positively (Maruyama et al., 2017), support tourism (Boley et al., 2014), and have a higher quality of life (Aleshinloye et al., 2022). Ramos and Prideaux (2014, p. 461) provide a different outcome-focused view of empowerment with their wheel of empowerment providing 60 indicators to help “graphically illustrate and compare levels of empowerment/disempowerment in local communities.”

While an outcome-based approach to resident empowerment provides value in identifying if residents are empowered (or not) across various domains, Park et al. (2024) rightfully acknowledge that an outcome-focused approach to resident empowerment only tells half the story. An outcome-based approach toward empowerment does not shed light on the process of *how* residents are empowered or disempowered. Park et al. (2024) rectify this deficiency within the literature through a new empowerment model that blends the work of Rowland (1997) and McClelland (1975). Rowland's (1997) empowerment model disaggregates empowerment into a process made up of four types of power. These are ‘power over,’ ‘power to,’ ‘power with,’ and ‘power within.’ ‘Power over’ is often the most common type of power focused on because it looks at how power is used to dominate others (Rowland, 1997). ‘Power to’ shifts the attention to how those with power are able to use this power to act in their best interest (Knight & Cottrell, 2016). ‘Power with’ turns the focus to how power is used with others to collectively achieve similar goals (Rowland, 1997). While ‘power over’ has a collective focus, ‘power within’ turns inward to assess an individual's “sense of self-worth and self-knowledge” and their “ability to recognize individual differences while respecting others” (Veneklasen & Miller, 2002, p. 39 cited in Park et al., 2024).

2.3. Backing up to ask residents what aspects of empowerment are important to them

While there are benefits to studying empowerment using outcome-based and process-based approaches, both fail to step back and start the research process at the place where most collaborative governance and co-designed tourism models suggest: listening to residents to learn what they value so that tourism can be designed based on their needs (Liburd et al., 2022; Sessin-Dilascio et al., 2015). Liburd et al. (2022, p. 2300) propose that the co-designing of tourism with residents deliberately seeks “to challenge the otherwise common understanding that a [sustainable tourism development] process can be efficiently planned, micro-managed, and controlled based on pre-determined outcomes.” Liburd et al. (2002) would, therefore, suggest that it is somewhat neo-colonial for tourism scholars to just assume that they know how residents ought to be empowered because the tourism literature says it is important without taking the time to ask them.

One way to give the power back to residents and co-design tourism with them is to actually ask them if they care to be empowered and, if so, in which ways they prefer to be empowered. One tool for doing this is Importance Performance Analysis. Importance Performance Analysis (IPA) is a tool developed within the business literature to help firms understand what is important to stakeholders and how well their business performs on those salient themes (Martilla & James, 1976). Its popularity stems from the easily decipherable four managerial quadrants that are action-focused: “Keep Up the Good Work,” “Concentrate Here,” “Low Priority,” and “Potential Overkill.” Essentially, asking stakeholders to rate the importance of an attribute and the performance of an entity on the attribute using Likert scales provides the ability to visually graph attributes into one of these four quadrants (Oh, 2001).

Following IPA development within the business literature, the tourism literature has quickly adopted the method (Lai & Hitchcock, 2015; Tyrrell & Okrant, 2004). The tourism literature is replete with IPA studies of tourists' perceptions on a range of issues including sustainability factors within hotels (Cvelbar & Dwyer, 2013), hot springs tourism (Deng, 2007), coral reef tourism (Coghlan, 2012), and a

destination's image and competitiveness (Dwyer et al., 2016). One noticeable area lacking among the hundreds of IPAs conducted within the tourism literature is applying the technique to residents, arguably the most important stakeholder in tourism. In Lai and Hitchcock's (2015) review of IPA within the tourism literature, they estimated that only one of the 59 studies applied the IPA technique to residents. Since Lai & Hitchcock, 2015 publication, there has been at least one study to help fill this gap (Boley et al., 2017), but the relative paucity of the technique being applied to residents is surprising given sustainable tourism's emphasis on the importance of residents and including them in the tourism planning process.

Thus, this research seeks to remedy this lack of knowledge on what residents think is important and how well their DMO is performing on these attributes by asking residents what aspects of empowerment they feel are important and which aspects of empowerment their community needs to improve on. This is accomplished by applying IPA to survey data recently collected from residents in the tourism destination of Brevard, North Carolina, USA. This type of analysis will provide DMOs with information on where to focus empowerment initiatives based on resident feedback rather than academic assumptions or topics that are en vogue.

3. Methods

3.1. Community background

To answer the question, “Do residents really care to be empowered?” Boley and McGehee's (2014) Resident Empowerment through Tourism Scale covering the dimensions of psychological, social, and political empowerment and dos Santos et al.'s (2024) economic empowerment scale were incorporated in a survey of residents of Transylvania County, NC USA. Transylvania County is an exemplar for many rural nature-based tourism destinations around the world with a resource extraction history that segued into a manufacturing industry for many years and then transitioned into a tourism-dependent economy in recent times. Transylvania County's manufacturing industries left in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and tourism has since become the primary economic driver and identity for the county. Transylvania County is marketed as ‘Explore Brevard’ based on the name of the main town in the county and is the main gateway into the popular Pisgah National Forest (NF). Transylvania County has the highest concentration of waterfalls in the United States, resulting in it being known and marketed as “The Land of Waterfalls” (Explore Brevard, 2024). Transylvania County's tourism industry experienced double-digit growth in 2022 (Denon, 2023), largely because of the quality of outdoor recreation provided in the county. Over half of the county is in national forest or state park ownership, providing abundant opportunities for public outdoor recreation. Transylvania County is one of the fastest-growing destinations in North Carolina (Transylvania County Tourism, 2020).

3.2. Sampling

Questionnaires were distributed to a sample of Transylvania County residents through a census-guided systematic random sampling scheme which proportionally divided Transylvania County based on the population structure of Transylvania's census tracts (University of Georgia Institutional Review Board Project 00005601) to ensure all parts of the county were represented proportionally to where people live. Questionnaires were distributed in person between May 9, 2023–May 22, 2023, and June 5, 2023–June 7, 2023. During that time, 1003 residences were visited. Of those contacted, 381 households did not answer the door, 82 refused participation on initial contact, 25 were ineligible (e.g., under 18 years of age or tourists renting a house), and surveys from 15 households were later returned blank (and subsequently reallocated to other households). In total, 500 questionnaires were distributed, and 405 of those were returned and completed. The overall response rate,

accounting for 82 immediate refusals and the 15 residents who returned blank questionnaires, was 68 % (405/597).

3.3. Crosshair selection in importance performance analysis

Importance Performance Analysis using a combination of data-centered and scale-centered techniques was employed to determine which aspects of empowerment Transylvania County, North Carolina, USA is performing well on and should “Keep Up The Good Work,” areas they need to “Concentrate On,” areas of “Low Priority,” and areas of “Potential Overkill.” Scale-centered IPAs use the mean of the five-point Likert scale as the discriminating threshold to create the crosshairs and determine quadrant placement. While straightforward, Oh (2001) acknowledges there is often a ‘ceiling effect’ with IPA where relatively important attributes are chosen for investigation, resulting in everything having a mean of 3.0 or higher since the question is already important, which is why it is being asked in the first place. To counter this, Taplin (2012) suggests using a data-centered approach where the mean importance ranking and the mean performance ranking of all of the attributes investigated are used so that the crosshairs are placed in relation to their relative importance and performance (Boley et al., 2017). While each individual empowerment item is graphed on the IPA (e.g., items A through N), the means for the latent constructs of psychological, social, political, and economic empowerment were used for setting the data-centered crosshairs so that the different dimensions of empowerment could be compared against one another. To show both the objective level of importance and performance of the empowerment items and latent constructs as well as the relative importance and performance of the empowerment items and latent constructs, two separate IPAs were conducted using a scale-centered and a data-centered approach.

4. Results

Residents comprising the sample had lived in Transylvania County for an average of 28 years. The average age of respondents was 62 years old, and those in the sample were predominantly white—consistent with recent census information for Transylvania County. Forty-four percent of residents had a four-year college degree or higher, and the household incomes were in the \$50,000 to \$74,999 range on average (see Perren et al., 2025 for a full demographic table).

Respondents indicated relative apathy towards the importance of

empowerment, with each dimension of empowerment scoring below 3.0 on a 5-point importance scale. The dimension of “Psychological Empowerment” was rated as the most important dimension of empowerment ($\bar{x} = 2.63$; $\sigma = 1.20$), while “Social Empowerment” was perceived as the least important type of empowerment ($\bar{x} = 2.28$; $\sigma = 1.19$). The performance ratings for the empowerment dimensions within the community of Transylvania County generally matched the low importance ratings, with all dimensions of empowerment scoring below 3.0. “Psychological Empowerment” had the highest performance scores ($\bar{x} = 2.95$; $\sigma = 1.11$), and “Political Empowerment” had the lowest ($\bar{x} = 2.05$; $\sigma = 1.03$) (Table 1).

Under the scale-centered method for plotting the ratings for importance and performance (when the Likert scale mid-point defines the graph centroid), the empowerment items and latent constructs all land in the “Low Priority” quadrant (Fig. 1). However, when using a data-centered method (that centers the plotting based on observed data patterns), the constructs of “Economic Empowerment” and “Political Empowerment” fell into the “Concentrate Here” quadrant, “Social Empowerment” landed in the “Possible Overkill” quadrant, and “Psychological Empowerment” landed in the “Keep up the Good Work” quadrant (Fig. 2).

5. Discussion and conclusions

While there is near unanimous agreement that for tourism to be considered sustainable, residents need to be empowered (Choi & Murray, 2010; Cole, 2006), and sustainable tourism development should seek to co-design tourism with residents (Liburd et al., 2022), surprisingly few tourism scholars have stepped back from the narrow view of solely measuring empowerment as an outcome to ask residents which dimensions of empowerment are important to them and how their community performs on these various dimensions of empowerment. This research sought to fill this gap by conducting an IPA based on Boley and McGehee's (2014) and Dos Santos et al.'s (2024) Resident Empowerment through Tourism Scale.

Results demonstrated that residents of Transylvania County, NC were generally apathetic towards being empowered by tourism when interpreting the results using a scale-centered technique. This result is interesting because it goes against what the prevailing literature says about the importance of empowerment being paramount to sustainable tourism (Cole, 2006; Scheyvens, 1999). Residents evaluated nearly all empowerment aspects as a “Low Priority” using the scale-centered IPA

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and cronbach alphas for empowerment constructs and items.

Empowerment Constructs/Items	Importance				Performance			
	N	Mean ^a	SD	α	N	Mean ^b	SD	α
<i>Psychological Empowerment (PSY)</i>	371	2.63	1.20	.920	364	2.95	1.11	.944
A) Tourism creating reasons for you to feel proud to be a Transylvania Co. resident.	368	2.49	1.31		359	2.96	1.19	
B) Tourism making you feel special because people travel to see your county's unique features.	364	2.58	1.36		356	3.06	1.21	
C) Tourism encouraging you to tell others about what Transylvania Co. has to offer.	368	2.66	1.31		358	3.00	1.18	
D) Tourism reminding you that you have a unique culture to share with visitors.	365	2.79	1.37		357	3.06	1.22	
E) Tourism making you want to work to keep Transylvania Co. special.	361	2.85	1.45		351	2.96	1.20	
<i>Social Empowerment (SOC)</i>	364	2.28	1.19	.915	358	2.50	1.10	.907
F) Tourism making you feel more connected to your community.	359	2.30	1.28		353	2.50	1.15	
G) Tourism fostering a sense of community spirit within yourself.	360	2.30	1.30		355	2.52	1.20	
H) Tourism providing ways for you to get involved in your community.	361	2.32	1.31		355	2.55	1.23	
<i>Political Empowerment (POL)</i>	364	2.69	1.34	.917	356	2.05	1.03	.945
I) Tourism providing you with a voice in tourism development decisions.	364	2.52	1.42		354	2.06	1.10	
J) Being provided with access to the decision-making process in tourism.	363	2.78	1.48		352	2.04	1.07	
K) Tourism providing you with an outlet to share your concerns about tourism development in Transylvania Co.	359	2.82	1.44		350	2.13	1.08	
<i>Economic Empowerment (ECO)</i>	363	2.62	1.24	.833	352	2.38	1.10	.897
L) Tourism providing ways for you to earn stable income from complementary sectors (i.e., retail, agriculture, and arts.)	360	2.31	1.44		345	2.46	1.22	
M) Tourism providing ways for you to use funds allocated from tourism to improve your community.	354	2.83	1.50		343	2.36	1.17	
N) Tourism making it so you feel you can benefit from tourism even if you're not employed in tourism.	361	2.82	1.37		350	2.44	1.21	

^a Importance questions were asked on a 1–5 Likert Scale with 1 representing “Not at All Important” and 5 representing “Extremely Important.”

^b Performance questions were asked on a 1–5 Likert Scale with 1 representing “Poor” and 5 representing “Excellent”.

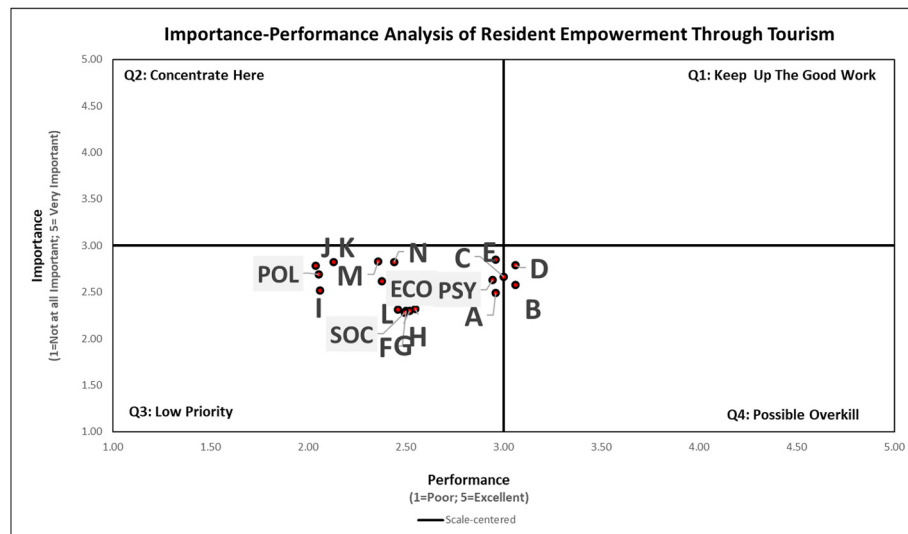


Fig. 1. Ipa of empowerment items and constructs using a scale-centered approach.

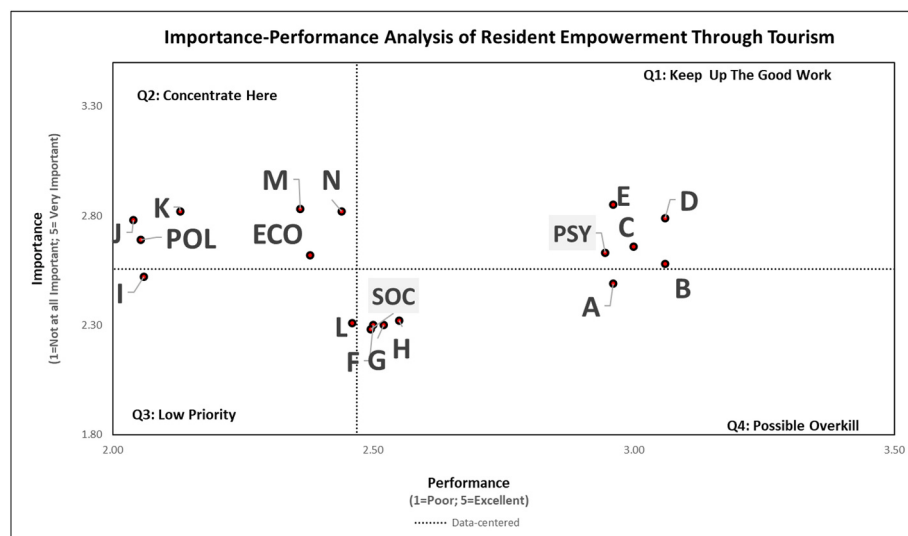


Fig. 2. Ipa of empowerment items and constructs using a data-centered approach.

approach. This means that residents of Transylvania County indicated that their community was performing poorly on all four domains of empowerment (i.e., Psychological, Social, Political, and Economic Empowerment) and that they felt those aspects of empowerment were of low importance.

While Transylvania County is just one tourism destination, this finding could relate to the rising general apathy for contemporary community engagement (Wilson, 2010). For some tourism destinations, empowerment may be a low priority regardless of how well a tourism destination empowers residents psychologically, socially, politically, or economically. Qualitative research is likely needed to fully understand this dynamic. However, this could indicate that residents are turning to other mechanisms (e.g., church or social groups), industries, or traditional political channels (e.g., town government) for empowerment and do not necessarily think it is important for tourism to provide them with a voice, economic benefits, community bonding, or pride. Tourism researchers need to recognize and acknowledge that tourism is just one component of the broader economic development landscape when conducting studies to understand the factors and social networks that influence community empowerment.

Despite residents' general apathy towards empowerment, the data-

centered IPA provides the ability to assess the relative importance and performance of empowerment domains, allowing priorities for the tourism industry to be established. Using the data-centered approach, Transylvania County residents reported "Keep Up the Good Work" IPA ratings for several psychological aspects of empowerment and "Concentrate Here" ratings for several political and economic aspects of empowerment. Empowerment aspects falling in those two quadrants are all rated relatively high in importance, with Psychological Empowerment items having relatively high ratings on performance ("Keep up the Good Work") while the Political and Economic Empowerment items have relatively low ratings on performance ("Concentrate Here"). The positively rated Psychological Empowerment aspects relate to the special and unique characteristics of the local place and the notion that local residents have something to share with outsiders. Highlighting the unique and interesting characteristics and history of a place and its people is the bread-and-butter of DMOs. Further, the specific messaging about why a place is special and unique is likely not especially contentious (at least among those in places of power in the community) and relatively stable over time. Focusing on marketing the unique aspects of the destination will also help the destination stand out among the competition and ensure that there is a good match between the type of

visitor showing up and the image residents want for their community (Boley, 2023). The negatively rated political and economic aspects of empowerment relate to residents perceiving a lack of having a role in tourism-related decision-making, mechanisms for voicing concerns, and receiving economic benefits from tourism. At face value, these negatively rated aspects appear to center on more contentious, difficult-to-address, and dynamic issues facing tourism communities around the world. Further, addressing these issues likely involves a broader set of governance organizations and community groups beyond just a local tourism organization. Thus, making any real progress on empowerment likely requires the work of a broad mix of community actors and organizations beyond the local DMO. The findings of Social Empowerment landing in the “Potential Overkill” quadrant show that compared to other empowerment domains, residents are generally happy with how tourism brings their community together. However, residents just do not think it is as important as psychological, political, or economic empowerment. These findings have implications for those managing tourism as well as academics who study sustainable tourism.

For leaders of DMOs, these results suggest there is value in measuring both importance and performance on resident sentiment surveys. Such efforts provide a more comprehensive picture of what residents value and their perceptions of current outcomes in a tourism community. For governance and community groups in tourism communities, these results suggest that the greatest potential gains in resident empowerment (in this community, at least) arise from coordinated efforts to improve resident involvement and access to decision-making, as well as to better distribute or highlight the economic benefits from tourism. Hence, organizations should consider tracking the importance and performance of their tourism industry on these empowerment domains to see if efforts aimed at economic empowerment or political empowerment are being recognized and pushing these empowerment domains towards the “Keep Up the Good Work” quadrant.

For researchers, having importance data can provide additional details for modeling the influence of resident empowerment over resident support for tourism. For example, Boley et al., 2014, Maruyama et al. (2016), and Strzelecka et al. (2017) all found political empowerment to have no relationship with support for tourism. Although none of them included importance metrics in their models, the low level of importance of political empowerment in the communities they surveyed could have potentially explained their surprising findings. Additional research is needed to understand why residents place differing levels of importance on empowerment constructs. Is it because the individuals differ in how (or whether) they are empowered by things other than tourism in their community, have different empowerment needs than the literature suggests, or have differing capacities to be involved in tourism planning and development? One solution suggested by Boley and Jordan (2023) is to calculate IPA gap scores (Performance – Importance) associated with the difference between performance evaluations and importance expectations and use them as antecedents to predict dependent variables such as intent to travel, as in their example. This method could be applied to modeling resident support for tourism where the IPA gap scores associated with empowerment are used as antecedents to resident support for tourism. This approach essentially operationalizes Oliver's (1980) expectancy disconfirmation paradigm because positive disconfirmations (Performance > Importance) would be positive and hypothesized to have a positive influence on resident support for tourism, and negative disconfirmations (Importance > Performance) would be negative and would be hypothesized to have a negative influence on resident support for tourism. A modification of this technique would be to multiply importance and performance and include the new variable as antecedent to resident support for tourism. This approach would also be a novel way to expand Boley et al.'s (2014) empowerment model, which currently relies solely on performance measures in its modeling of resident support for tourism. Another opportunity for researchers to build on this technique is to segment residents based on important criteria, such as the length of residency or employment in tourism, to

test whether empowerment IPA findings differ across groups.

5.1. Limitations and areas for future research

As already alluded to, this research does not answer the question as to why certain domains of empowerment are relatively more (or less) important to residents. A logical place to start for any DMO or tourism researcher seeking to truly empower a community and help co-design sustainable tourism with residents is qualitative research. Qualitative research is great at unearthing community priorities that may not be known within the academic literature. Priorities unearthed from the qualitative analysis could then be paired with the empowerment domains to implement a more comprehensive IPA. This approach will create a data-driven priority list for tourism leaders in the community based on residents' priorities compared to the status quo, which solely assesses the priorities of the tourism industry or tourism academics.

Another limitation of the study is that it does not include the environmental empowerment scale developed by Dos Santos et al. (2024) or the cultural empowerment scale developed by Castillo-Vizuet et al. (2024). Both of these scales covering these dimensions were published after the 2023 data collection and, thus, were not included. Future research could provide a more comprehensive IPA to see how Mendoza-Ramos and Prideaux's (2018) ‘wheel of empowerment’ performs on the IPA. Future research could also include other standard items and constructs in the IPA to see how residents perceive them, such as the positive and negative impacts of tourism. Social Exchange Theory has long been based on resident perceptions of the positive and negative impacts of tourism, but no one has stepped back to ask residents which positive and negative impacts of tourism matter the most to them and to gauge which of the four IPA quadrants they fall into. Other ideas for extending the use of IPA within the sustainable tourism literature are to look at resident perceptions of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These 17 SDGs are published by the UN to help the world rally behind solving the world's most pressing questions. However, these SDGs may not be universally valued by all communities. An IPA of the UN's SDGs in the context of tourism would help officials know where to prioritize their efforts. Lastly, these results are from only one rural gateway community in North Carolina. Hence, it would be prudent to apply the same survey to other communities within other countries to see how empowerment domains vary in importance and performance across various contexts. It would also be wise to seek destinations that vary in economic dependence on tourism and vary on a range of factors to see how those factors influence the IPA results.

With empowerment being a central tenet of the sustainable tourism literature (Aleshinloye et al., 2022; Boley et al., 2014; Cole, 2006; Sofield, 2003), this research sought to empower residents by asking them to share their tourism development priorities rather than just relying on the priorities of academics or the DMO. If researchers and practitioners really care about developing tourism for residents and by residents, as Scheyven's (1999) seminal article suggests, more research is needed to identify resident priorities and benchmark how well destinations are performing on those priorities. IPA is one method that can help with this as it pairs importance metrics with performance metrics providing residents with a voice ensuring their top priorities are being addressed.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

B. Bynum Boley: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Chase Perren:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Data curation. **Eric M. White:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Gary T. Green:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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