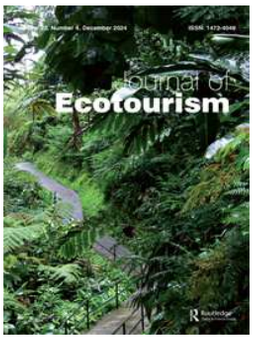

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Sociodemographic and socioeconomic heterogeneity in considering residents' empowerment from ecotourism

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to challenge the notion that residents experience empowerment from ecotourism to the same degree in central Ecuador. The recently amended Resident Empowerment through Tourism Scale was employed to assess potential differences in six empowerment dimensions (i.e. economic, psychological, sociological, cultural, political, and environmental) considering a community's socio-demographic and socioeconomic variables (i.e. age, gender, level of education, urban/rural place of residence, length of residence, and ecotourism employment). Understanding heterogeneity in residents' empowerment will better assist tourism managers and planners in decision making efforts. Onsite survey data were collected from residents living in and adjacent to Riobamba at their homes between May and August of 2022. The final sample included 486 completed questionnaires. Multiple analyses of variance tests were conducted to reveal any significant differences in empowerment across socio-demographic and socioeconomic variables. Ecuadorians living in urban areas adjacent to Chimborazo volcano who are younger and more educated reported feeling the highest level of empowerment through ecotourism. Interestingly, responses on length of residence showed that newer residents reported higher degrees of sociological, cultural, political, and environmental empowerment compared to long-term residents. In contrast, no significant differences were found in empowerment based on gender or employment within ecotourism.

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Introduction

Resident empowerment through tourism has proven to be a requisite outcome of sustainable tourism development. Building on the initial conceptualization of empowerment in ecotourism by Scheyvens (1999), scholars worldwide have confirmed its applicability across various contexts (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017), refined and added to its dimensions

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(Castillo-Vizuete et al., 2024; Joo et al., 2020; Scheyvens & van der Watt, 2021), showed its importance to equitable development (Abou-Shouk et al., 2021; Cole, 2018), and developed scales through which it can be measured (Boley & McGehee, 2014; Castillo-Vizuete et al., 2024; Moreira dos Santos et al., 2024; Neuts et al., 2021).

It is undeniable that tourism, and the residents who are subject to its impacts, are embedded in a system of societal-level conditions. Resident empowerment has been studied and posited as a means for the mitigation of negative tourism impacts on communities despite unfavourable external conditions (Goodwin, 2007; Xu & Hu, 2021). Recent research has demonstrated that empowerment is influenced by a limitless number of factors, even those external to the community (Scheyvens, 2021). While previous research on empowerment is important, it has largely treated communities as homogeneous, failing to dedicate significant attention to how various factors might differ *within* a community. Despite the vast possible external conditions governing resident empowerment, which we acknowledge, the degree to which residents feel empowered by tourism is also dependent on individual-level traits. Residents' propensity to be empowered by tourism is individualistic, determined by one's societal position, their individual capital, and traits that determine their involvement with (or benefits from) the tourism system. That is, individual traits (e.g. level of education, employment, and gender among others) are important to understand who *is* and *is not* empowered in sustainable tourism development.

While the lion's share of research centred on tourism empowerment among residents has become analytically sophisticated in modelling schemes (Aleshinloye et al., 2022; Mody et al., 2023), we argue such work has 'put the cart before the horse,' potentially compromising a closer look at how perceived empowerment among residents is distinct among members of an ecotourism community. At the beginning of 2023, Ecuador's Ministry of Tourism developed a strategic campaign to target an additional 2 million ecotourists to the central region of the county to complement the burgeoning number of tourists within the Galapagos and the Amazonian areas already well-known for their ecotourism offerings. Given the relative novelty of ecotourism in the central region, little is known about how residents perceive empowerment from ecotourism with respect to various demographic variables. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to understand the differences in empowerment considering a community's socio-demographic and socioeconomic distinctiveness through key variables such as age, gender, highest level of education, place of residence – whether urban or rural, length of residence in the community, and employment in the local tourism sector. To do this, we employed the six-dimensional amended Residents' Empowerment through Tourism (RETS) advanced by Castillo-Vizuete et al. (2024). Our results have the potential to contribute to the continued utilization of the amended RETS in assessing theoretical models. Furthermore, knowledge of extreme levels of empowerment among specific socio-demographic and socioeconomic variables can assist ecotourism planners in directing efforts to stimulate empowerment within a community.

Literature review

Empowerment

The Cornell Empowerment Group (1989) coined the term 'empowerment' as 'an intentional ongoing process centred in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical

reflection, caring, and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources' (p. 2). Crucial to this definition is that empowerment involves three unique aspects: efforts to gain control; access to resources; and a critical understanding of one's sociopolitical context (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 583). Approaching from a tourism angle, and considering a review of definitions of empowerment, Scheyvens and van der Watt (2021) argue that the construct boils down to its multi-dimensionality, context specificity, formation as both a process and outcome – and an aspect seldom addressed – power, and its redistribution to marginalized groups.

With now over two decades of research into the topic, the need for residents to be empowered by tourism has become a central tenet of sustainable tourism development – especially now more than ever in our current global economic crisis exacerbated by inflation and stagnant wages. Conversations about what empowerment is and the makeup of its constituent dimensions have been ongoing since Scheyvens (1999) first introduced her seminal framework. Empowerment as a process shows how residents can have a voice in determining the future of their communities (Annes & Wright, 2015; Cole, 2006), and as an outcome, shows the great potential of equitably developed tourism (Boley et al., 2017; McMillan et al., 2011). As Garrod (2003) notes,

> Empowerment of the local community should … be a primary objective of ecotourism. This will help to enhance the participation of local community in the planning and management process and, in so doing, ultimately enhance the potential for genuinely sustainable ecotourism to be developed in the local area concerned. (p. 42)

Empowerment has also been used as a tool to reform (or elude) existing power structures in favour of marginalized groups (Abdullah et al., 2022; Knight & Cottrell, 2016). Even the context in which people are empowered by tourism has proven to be an important factor to consider (see examples in Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017). Despite these points, one collective view of empowerment is that the construct is multi-dimensional, measured using as few as two and as many as six dimensions (Moswete & Lacey, 2015). This speaks to the lack of consistency in measuring the construct. Most recently, this was demonstrated by Castillo-Vizuete et al. (2024) which used six dimensions and Moreira dos Santos et al. (2024) which employed five dimensions.

Mendoza-Ramos and Prideaux (2018) argue that to fully assess the role of empowerment through ecotourism, an environmental dimension must be included. Therefore, measurements of empowerment as a tool for sustainable ecotourism development should comprise of six distinct dimensions. Those six dimensions are: economic, psychological, sociological, cultural, political, and environmental (Scheyvens & van der Watt, 2021). Economic empowerment is reflected when the financial benefits of tourism are visible in the improved lifestyles of community members. Conversely, economic *dis*empowerment is evident when only a few community members see the financial benefits of tourism growth. Psychological empowerment, on the other hand can be seen when tourism development enhances the self-esteem and confidence of community members, while social empowerment might improve a community's ability to work collaboratively on local projects. Political empowerment describes the improved political voice of disadvantaged community groups in tourism development efforts and when the structure of politics in the community seeks to represent the needs of all residents.

Lastly, environmental empowerment is used to describe tourism development that respects the decision-making capacity of community members regarding the use of natural resources.

Despite the great deal of research reviewed here, we still lack a substantial application of empowerment which gives us an adequate picture of how our communities' most vulnerable residents are impacted by tourism (Boley et al., 2015; Scheyvens & van der Watt, 2021). As empowerment becomes increasingly salient in studies involving the impacts of tourism, all facets that might influence empowerment must be thoroughly investigated, especially since Stone (2015) championed the notion that empowerment from ecotourism should span across individuals, households, and communities. Unfortunately, though, as Aghazamani and Hunt (2017) noted, most articles on empowerment (i.e. 142 out of the 195 they reviewed) do not sufficiently apply empowerment concepts. More recently, Scheyvens and van der Watt (2021) called for more insight into external influences of empowerment in tourism. Using this logic, the authors developed a new framework that positions the six dimensions of empowerment as embedded in seven 'enabling conditions' (p. 8) or external factors such as the local and regional institutional context in which tourism occurs.

This new framing of empowerment is important but so too is the *context* in which individuals interact with tourism. Scheyvens and van der Watt (2021) highlight the importance of laws and policies, social capital, customary practices, market access, and other conditions for empowerment. This is the context-dependence of empowerment they reference in their conceptualization. However, who a person *is* in the context of society (their gender, social class, and access to these enabling conditions) is important to consider as well. Such insight will assist tourism managers and planners in making the most informed decisions regarding ecotourism within local communities. To date, no study has adequately explored the degree to which such six dimensions of resident empowerment may differ with regards to key socio-demographic characteristics. As such, we adopt the recently amended Residents' Empowerment through Tourism Scale by Castillo-Vizuete et al. (2024) to consider how distinct dimensions of empowerment may vary across self-reported socio-demographics.

Demographic measures in empowerment research

Empowerment research suggests that through prescriptive processes, the most disadvantaged in our society might be able to participate in community- and life-altering decision-making, including decisions in the workplace, in community governance, (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017; Goodkind & Foster-Fishman, 2002; Rowlands, 1997). This is especially true in tourism (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017; Ramos & Prideaux, 2014; Scheyvens, 1999) and is true for the elderly and youth, women, those with limited access to education, and those who live in areas outside of the economic core.

Most research focuses on empowerment within similar age ranges, limiting insight on the effect of age on the potential for empowerment through tourism (Li et al., 2022). Thus far, there is a lack of clear differentiation in empowerment levels among youth and the elderly, despite tourism's potential to support disadvantaged groups such as the elderly (Weng & Peng, 2014). While youth empowerment is linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and is often driven by tourism opportunities (Canosa et al., 2024; Sukarieh

& Tannock, 2011; Úcar Martínez et al., 2017), similar studies have yet to fully explore how these dynamics vary between different age groups. On the other hand, gender plays a significant role, as women, who constitute a large portion of the tourism workforce, have been shown to gain significant empowerment through tourism activities, although this empowerment often reinforces traditional roles rather than challenging them (McMillan et al., 2011; UN Tourism, 2019). Gender-specific research underscores how tourism can facilitate women's independence and agency but also highlights persistent patriarchal challenges (Movono & Dahles, 2017; Panta & Thapa, 2018; Rowlands, 1997). Additionally, tourism can influence gender dynamics within communities, sometimes shifting traditional power structures and roles, as seen in cases where men have taken on roles traditionally held by women (Elshaer et al., 2021).

Educational attainment and place of residence might also play a role in the degree to which a community member is empowered by tourism. Education has not been applied directly to measures of empowerment but has been used as a proxy for income level (Thomsen et al., 2022). A person's income, their socioeconomic standing and educational level have been mentioned in relation to empowerment, however, such concepts remain underexplored when considering how empowerment differs across community residents. The experiences of tourism among rural and urban residents have shown to be significantly different (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017), but differences of empowerment have yet to be uncovered. Furthermore, rural and urban contexts show distinct empowerment experiences, with rural tourism development often altering community power dynamics, while urban tourism may exacerbate exclusion among disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Maruyama et al., 2016; Park et al., 2024).

The impact of length of residence has not been directly measured against empowerment through tourism. However, length of residence has been linked to place attachment, which influences residents' psychological, social, and political empowerment through tourism (Strzelecka et al., 2017). This suggests that length of residence might have an influence on the degree to which someone is empowered through tourism. Similarly, while employment in the tourism sector can mediate psychological and political empowerment (Elshaer et al., 2021), research has yet to determine if those employed in tourism are more or less empowered than those outside the sector, especially given the disempowering tendencies noted among employment in tourism (Nassani et al., 2019). Despite these findings, gaps remain in understanding how these socio-demographic factors interplay with empowerment through tourism, emphasizing the need for continued exploration into these dimensions (Scheyvens & van der Watt, 2021). Addressing these gaps in the context of specific regions is essential for understanding the nuanced ways in which socio-demographic factors influence empowerment through tourism. Due to the recent push by the Ecuadorian government for tourism within the Riobamba region, little is known about how empowered residents may be through the industry. Therefore, using a modified Residents' Empowerment through Tourism Scale (RETS), this research aims to: (1) confirm the factor structure of the new RETS and (2) examine how six forms of empowerment may differ across distinct socio-demographic variables among residents adjacent to Chimborazo. Having such information will better equip tourism planners both within Riobamba and at the national level to encourage residents to engage with tourism and potentially support the industry.

Methods

Study site

While Amazonia and the Galapagos Islands put Ecuador on the itinerary for adventure-seeking ecotourists, the mountainous inland, situated among more than 20 peaks of at least 14,000 feet in elevation above sea level or ASL (4200 m), is growing in popularity. Chimborazo, the highest peak in the region (20,702 feet) ASL (6310 m), measures as the furthest point from the centre of the Earth (NOAA, n.d.). In efforts to rebound from the COVID-19 pandemic, Ecuador's Ministry of Tourism (in January 2022) developed a new strategy to attract ecotourists – with the region including Chimborazo playing a central role in reaching 2 million visitors by 2025 (González Lara, 2022). With renewed interest from the government, and more attention being paid by the global development spheres, this region serves as an ideal location to assess the degree to which residents are empowered across various socio-demographic characteristics. Measuring empowerment in rural Ecuador also heeds a call for more application of the RETS framework in developing countries (Boley, 2015).

Sampling and data collection

This study was undertaken within the high-altitude canton of Riobamba, Ecuador. Residents of the canton live among several volcanoes, notably Chimborazo, and parts of the canton are in protected natural areas such as the Chimborazo Natural Reserve and the Sangay National Park (Vizuete et al., 2021, 2023). Survey data were collected between May and August of 2022 through questionnaires administered at residents' homes by a member of the research team. Onsite survey data were secured following a systematic sampling strategy with a random start. More specifically, neighbourhoods were randomly selected throughout Riobamba, the largest city most adjacent to Chimborazo. From these neighbourhoods, homes were randomly selected and visited by the research team. To minimize any potential for duplication of responses, only one participant from each selected household was asked to participate. Seven hundred homes were visited, 100 of these had representatives who declined to participate. In total, 550 questionnaires were submitted by residents. We removed 54 questionnaires that were incomplete. The final sample size involved 496 residents, with 368 from residents living in urban locations and 128 from those in rural areas.

Measures and analysis

Borrowing from Scheyvens and van der Watt's (2021) work, residents of Riobamba were asked about their level of agreement (on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*) of items measuring residents' empowerment through tourism (or RETS). Thirteen items, across six distinct dimensions, were included in this survey – economic (two items); psychological (two); sociological (two); cultural (two); political (two); and environmental (three). Wording for these 13 items is in Table 2.

In addition to empowerment dimensions, categorical variables capturing respondents' demographic information were included on the questionnaire (i.e. age, gender, education level, residence location; length of residence; and tourism employment). The variables were categorical to increase the likelihood of response. The demographic variables

selected for this study have been used previously in testing the heterogeneity of resident responses in tourism research (see Maruyama & Woosnam, 2015; Woosnam et al., 2017). The questionnaire was developed in English and then translated to Spanish using back-translation (Malhotra et al., 1996). The bilingual research team in Ecuador translated the questionnaire directly from English to Spanish and then back to English. Two bilingual researchers (one whose primary language was Spanish and the other whose primary language was Spanish) were able to oversee the translation of the scale back and forth between English and Spanish to ensure translational equivalence. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed to confirm the factor structure of the scale. Finally, a series of multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) tests were conducted to test variation in responses about resident empowerment across the demographic variables. MANOVA has been shown to be useful for testing differences between independent groups with more than one continuous dependent variable (Green & Salkind, 2016).

Results

Resident profile

Respondents were relatively evenly distributed across three age groups: 18–29 (34.4%), 30–39 (35.8%), and 40+ years of age (29.8%). A little over half (51.4%) of respondents identified as female. Most (56%) indicated secondary/high school certificate/diploma as their highest level of education achieved, followed by primary/elementary school (17.8%), a four-year bachelor's degree (14%), and technical, vocational, or trade school (9.6%). Nearly two out of three participants reside in an urban area (65%), a vast majority do not work in the tourism sector (97.4%). The median and mean length of time respondents have lived in Riobamba was 34 years. Coupling length of residence in Riobamba and age would allow us to infer most of the respondents have lived in the region their entire lives (Table 1).

Factor structure of RETS and psychometric properties

Prior to examining differences in RETS dimensions across demographic variables, the 13 items comprising the modified RETS were subjected to confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (Table 2). This resulted in a model fit of $\chi^2(n = 496) = 49.20$, $df = 50$, $\chi^2/df = 0.10$, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.97, TLI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.01, and SRMR = 0.03. From the CFA, all 13 had standardized factor loadings greater than 0.70, and it was deemed unnecessary to remove any item at that point. Further, each of the *t*-test values associated with factor loadings were significant ($p < 0.001$). Composite reliabilities for factors were greater than the recommended 0.80 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Further, the average variance extracted (AVE) for each dimension was greater than 0.60, well beyond the accepted threshold of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Therefore, the model demonstrates convergent validity.

RETS factors across socio-demographic variables

With strong psychometric properties among the six dimensions of the amended RETS, composite dimension means were calculated (as bolded in Table 2). This allowed us to

Table 1. Participant profile.

Socio-demographic variable	*n*	%
Age ($n = 500$; *Median* = 34 years of age; $M = 34.75$ years of age)		
18–29 years of age	172	34.4
30–39 years of age	179	35.8
40+ years of age	149	29.8
Gender ($n = 500$)		
Female	257	51.4
Male	243	48.6
Education level ($n = 500$; *Median* = secondary/high school certificate/diploma)		
Primary/elementary school	89	17.8
Secondary/high school certificate/diploma	280	56.0
Technical, vocational, or trade school	48	9.6
Bachelor's degree (four-year degree)	70	14.0
Graduate degree (Master's, Ph.D.)	13	2.6
Urban vs. rural ($n = 500$)		
Urban	325	65.0
Rural	175	35.0
Employed in tourism sector ($n = 500$)		
Yes	13	2.6
No	487	97.4
Length of residence ($n = 500$; *Median* = 34 years; $M = 34.1$ years)		
30 years or less	203	40.6
31–39 years	164	32.8
40+ years	133	26.6

run separate MANOVA models to address the second purpose of our paper; to see if significant mean differences were present in each of the six dimensions across each of the socio-demographic and socioeconomic variables (i.e. age, gender, education level, place of residence – urban or rural, length of residence, and tourism employment). Empowerment perception differences were found in the first model involving *age* – MANOVA, Wilks's $\Lambda = 0.925$, $F(12,984) = 3.24$; $p < 0.001$ (Table 3). Follow-up analyses of variance (ANOVA) were then performed as post-hoc tests using the Bonferroni method ($p_{\text{critical}} = 0.008$) to reduce likelihood of Type 1 errors. Significant differences were found among all dimensions (except psychological), whereby those aged 18–29 reported a significantly higher means of empowerment than those at least 40 years of age. In two instances (i.e. cultural and environmental), those aged 30–39 also reported significantly higher means than individuals at least 40 years of age. The MANOVA for *gender* (Wilks's $\Lambda = 0.992$, $F(6493) = 0.66$, $p = 0.68$) was not significant, and therefore, ANOVA tests were not considered.

The third MANOVA – for education level (Wilks's $\Lambda = 0.738$, $F(24,1711) = 6.49$, $p < 0.001$) was significant. The resulting ANOVA tests revealed significant differences within all empowerment dimensions (excluding psychological). As noted in Table 4, those with primary/elementary education levels expressed a significantly lower degree of economic, cultural, political, and environmental empowerment than those with secondary/high school, tech/vocational/trade, four-year college, or graduate education. Further, those with primary/elementary education demonstrated a significantly lower degree of sociological empowerment than those in the three middle education categories.

Differences in RETS dimensional means were most pronounced across place of residence (Wilks's $\Lambda = 0.303$, $F(6493 = 188.65)$, $p < 0.001$) in that those from urban areas indicated a higher degree of empowerment from tourism (for all six dimensions) than did those from rural areas (Table 5). Based on ANOVA results, the most certain

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis[a] of RETS items.

Factor and corresponding item	Mean[b]	Standardized Factor Loading (*t* value[c])	Composite Reliability	AVE[d]
Economic tourism empowerment	**2.57**		***.89***	***.81***
Tourism brings lasting economic gains to my household.	2.58	.90 (17.28)		
Those from marginalized backgrounds have opportunities to gain senior positions in the tourism sector or run their own tourism-related business.	2.57	.90 (16.85)		
Psychological tourism empowerment	***3.96***		***.81***	***.69***
Increased earnings from tourism employment improve my self-esteem.	4.04	.90 (10.64)		
Training opportunities in tourism enhance my self-confidence.	3.88	.75 (8.18)		
Sociological tourism empowerment	***3.40***		***.98***	***.97***
Tourism supports networks that bring together people from different backgrounds.	3.40	.99 (109.15)		
Tourism contributes to creating places, infrastructure and services that benefit all local residents.	3.39	.97 (49.02)		
Cultural tourism empowerment	***3.56***		***.94***	***.88***
Customs, languages, values, and cultural sites are valued and respected by tourism businesses and residents.	3.57	.97 (19.74)		
Tourism businesses allow indigenous groups ability to self-represent their culture.	3.55	.91 (25.79)		
Political tourism empowerment	***1.34***		***.78***	***.64***
Tourism planners provide me with opportunities to be involved in decision making.	1.35	.81 (9.50)		
I have an outlet to share my concerns about tourism.	1.32	.79 (12.46)		
Environmental tourism empowerment	***1.82***		***.96***	***.89***
I have an enhanced awareness of intrinsic value of natural environment because of tourism.	1.81	.92 (37.06)		
I am willing to avoid environmental degradation because of tourism.	1.84	.92 (42.41)		
Tourism businesses take the lead in implementing sustainable practices.	1.81	.99 (341.41)		

[a]χ^2 (50, $N = 496$) = 49.20, $p > 0.05$, $\chi^2/df = 0.098$, RMSEA = 0.01, SRMR = 0.03, TLI = 0.97, CFI = 0.99.
[b]Items were rated on a 5-point scale, where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*.
[c]All *t* tests were significant at $p < 0.001$.
[d]Average variance extracted, or AVE, is the square root of the variance shared between factors and their measures. Each reported exceeded squared factor correlation estimates.

distinctions were found in environmental and cultural empowerment, albeit both urban and rural residents indicated low levels of agreement with the former.

For length of residency (Wilks's $\Lambda = 0.928$, $F(12,984) = 3.13$, $p < 0.001$), differences were found in four dimensions (i.e. sociological, cultural, political, and environmental)

Table 3. RETS factors across age[a].

	Means[b]			ANOVA results[c]	
RETS factor	18–29	30–39	40+	*F*	*p*
Economic empowerment	2.67[d]	2.56	2.48[d]	5.72	.003
Psychological empowerment	4.00	3.96	3.92	0.38	.688
Sociological empowerment	3.48[e]	3.40	3.30[e]	5.58	.004
Cultural empowerment	3.65[f]	3.61[g]	3.40[fg]	9.06	<.001
Political empowerment	1.41[h]	1.35	1.23[h]	6.28	.002
Environmental empowerment	1.93[i]	1.85[j]	1.67[ij]	11.03	<.001

[a]MANOVA model: Wilks's $\Lambda = 0.925$, $F(12,984) = 3.24$, $p < 0.001$.
[b]RETS items were asked on a 5-point scale where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*.
[c]Significance determined at 0.008 level.
[d–j]Same letter in row indicates significant mean difference at the 0.008 level within the ANOVA model.

Table 4. RETS factors across educational level[a].

	Means[b]					ANOVA results[c]	
RETS factor	Primary/ Elementary	Secondary/High School	Tech, vocation trade	Four-year college	Grad degree	*F*	*p*
Economic empowerment	2.17[defg]	2.65[d]	2.69[e]	2.66[f]	2.77[g]	17.79	<.001
Psychological empowerment	3.72	3.97	4.09	4.09	4.23	2.77	.027
Sociological empowerment	3.08[hij]	3.46[h]	3.40[i]	3.56[j]	3.30	13.67	<.001
Cultural empowerment	3.27[klm]	3.58[k]	3.60[l]	3.77[m]	3.69	9.48	<.001
Political empowerment	1.10[nop]	1.36[n]	1.49[o]	1.41[p]	1.42	8.78	<.001
Environmental empowerment	1.43[qrst]	1.87[q]	1.94[r]	2.00[s]	2.05[t]	19.75	<.001

[a]MANOVA model: Wilks's $\Lambda = 0.738$, $F(24,1711) = 6.49$, $p < 0.001$.
[b]RETS items were asked on a 5-point scale where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*.
[c]Significance determined at 0.008 level.
[d–t]Same letter in row indicates significant mean difference at the 0.008 level within the ANOVA model.

where those who lived in the area for the least amount of time felt significantly more empowered by tourism than those who had lived there the longest amount of time (Table 6). Though the economic empowerment model was significant overall, no significant pairwise comparisons were found.

The final MANOVA – for tourism employment – was not significant (Wilks's $\Lambda = 0.990$, $F(6493) = 0.85$, $p = 0.531$). Like the test for gender, empowerment dimensional means were nearly identical for those who were worked in tourism compared with those who worked in another industry. An interesting trend to note is that across all MANOVA tests, residents reported political and environmental empowerment the lowest, and psychological and social the highest.

Discussion

Conclusion

This research set out to address two key aims – to confirm the factor structure of the modified Residents' Empowerment through Tourism Scale (RETS) (Castillo-Vizuete

Table 5. RETS factors across place of residence[a].

	Means[b]		ANOVA results[c]	
RETS factor	Urban	Rural	*F*	*p*
Economic empowerment	2.78	2.18	200.86	<.001
Psychological empowerment	4.09	3.73	20.46	<.001
Sociological empowerment	3.57	3.07	157.57	<.001
Cultural empowerment	3.78	3.14	219.62	<.001
Political empowerment	1.46	1.10	86.33	<.001
Environmental empowerment	2.08	1.35	425.03	<.001

[a]MANOVA model: Wilks's $\Lambda = 0.303$, $F(6493 = 188.65)$, $p < 0.001$.
[b]RETS items were asked on a 5-point scale where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*.
[c]Significance determined at 0.008 level.

Table 6. RETS factors across length of residency[a].

	Means[b]			ANOVA results[c]	
RETS factor	30 or under	31–39	40+	*F*	*p*
Economic empowerment	2.66	2.53	2.49	5.12	.006
Psychological empowerment	4.00	3.93	3.95	0.23	.794
Sociological empowerment	3.47[d]	3.37	3.31[d]	4.89	.008
Cultural empowerment	3.66[e]	3.56	3.40[e]	9.10	<.001
Political empowerment	1.40[f]	1.32	1.25[f]	4.84	.008
Environmental empowerment	1.92[g]	1.83[h]	1.65[gh]	11.27	<.001

[a]MANOVA model: Wilks's $\Lambda = 0.928$, $F(12,984) = 3.13$, $p < 0.001$.
[b]RETS items were asked on a 5-point scale where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*.
[c]Significance determined at 0.008 level.
[d–h]Same letter in row indicates significant mean difference at the 0.008 level within the ANOVA model.

et al., 2024) and to explore how different socio-demographic and socioeconomic factors influence resident empowerment through ecotourism in the Riobamba region using the new RETS. Based on our findings, an identical 6-factor structure to Castillo-Vizuete et al. (2024) resulted with comparably strong psychometric properties (e.g. reliabilities and validities). The findings offer critical insights into the relationship between these factors and empowerment through tourism. The results indicate that specific socio-demographic factors – such as age, education, place of residence, and length of residence – play a critical role in shaping perceptions of empowerment through ecotourism. Younger residents (18–29 years) of the Riobamba canton, particularly those living in urban areas and with higher levels of education, reported feeling significantly more empowered across multiple dimensions, including economic, cultural, political, and environmental empowerment. These findings are consistent with studies that suggest younger generations tend to be more engaged and optimistic about community-driven initiatives like ecotourism (Sangpikul & Batra, 2007), possibly due to their greater familiarity with contemporary environmental and economic challenges.

Education level also plays a role here, with higher education correlating with greater economic, cultural, political, and environmental empowerment. Education has been presented both as a *means* for empowerment (Nassani et al., 2019; Radović-Marković & Živanović, 2019) and as a positive *outcome* of empowerment (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017). Findings from this study suggest that education can also be an *antecedent* for empowerment through tourism. With previous research suggesting that psychological empowerment influences support for tourism (Boley et al., 2018), this finding contributes to the unsettled debate as to whether level of education plays a role in residents' support for sustainable tourism development (Viana-Lora et al., 2024).

Interestingly, the finding that urban residents felt more empowered than rural residents across all six dimensions highlights an urban-rural divide in how ecotourism's benefits are distributed and perceived. While urban residents may have better access to infrastructure, information, and employment opportunities, rural residents, despite living closer to natural attractions and having a greater sense of place identity (Anton & Lawrence, 2014), may not feel the same level of inclusion or benefit. This finding aligns with studies that emphasize the importance of resource allocation in ensuring equitable benefits from ecotourism (Yeboah, 2024). Additionally, residents that have lived in Riobamba for less time felt more empowered than long-term residents in the sociological, cultural, political, and environmental dimensions, indicating that the

longevity of one's residency might lead to differing perceptions of ecotourism's benefits. This raises intriguing questions about how community dynamics influence empowerment. This finding could suggest that newer residents, who may bring fresh perspectives or engage more actively in community initiatives, feel a stronger connection to the transformative potential of ecotourism. However, it may also indicate that long-term residents have more entrenched views or experiences of marginalization that prevent them from feeling similarly empowered. The absence of significant differences in empowerment based on gender or employment in the tourism sector is noteworthy. Contrary to prior research that found gender disparities in tourism-related empowerment (e.g. Boley et al., 2017), this study suggests that, at least in the Riobamba region, gender may not be as influential in shaping empowerment perceptions. This may reflect evolving gender dynamics in Ecuador or the specific nature of ecotourism in this region, which could offer more inclusive opportunities. Similarly, the lack of difference based on employment in the tourism sector suggests that simply working in tourism is not enough to drive empowerment, broader factors like length of residence and access to education appear to play more significant roles. In summary, these findings underscore the importance of considering a range of socio-demographic factors when developing tourism policies and planning initiatives aimed at enhancing resident empowerment through tourism.

Implications

This study enhances the theoretical understanding of resident empowerment through tourism by emphasizing its variability across individual socio-demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. The findings validate the multi-dimensional and context-specific nature of empowerment, as articulated in the foundational work of Scheyvens (1999) and further developed by Scheyvens and van der Watt (2021), and again by Castillo-Vizuete et al. (2024). Our research further provides support for the utilization of the modified RETS. Employment of the scale still needs to be undertaken in various contexts to examine its utility – specifically in ecotourism contexts and generally in sustainable tourism contexts. By highlighting differences in empowerment across factors such as age, education, and place of residence, this research challenges the notion of homogeneous community responses to tourism. It also underscores the need for scholars to account for individual-level traits when assessing empowerment, aligning with recent calls in the literature for a deeper examination of how socio-demographic and socioeconomic characteristics shape empowerment experiences (e.g. Boley et al., 2017). This contributes to the growing body of work that argues for a more nuanced approach to understanding empowerment, one that considers the diverse ways in which different community members engage with and benefit from ecotourism.

From a practical perspective, the results of this study provide actionable insights for ecotourism planners and policymakers in the Riobamba region and similar contexts. Recognizing that younger, more educated, and urban residents report higher levels of empowerment through ecotourism suggests that targeted interventions could be designed to address the needs and challenges of older, less educated, and rural residents who may feel less empowered. For instance, to improve economic empowerment through tourism, practitioners should design programmes that target these residents

to ensure they benefit economically in an equitable way from ecotourism. This could involve creating job opportunities that match the skill levels of older or less educated residents, thus mitigating any potential for gaps in economic empowerment.

While psychological empowerment did not show strong demographic variability, it remains critical in resident support for tourism, influencing the sustainability of the local tourism sector (Boley et al., 2018). Therefore, efforts should be made to promote a sense of pride and self-esteem among all residents, ensuring that ecotourism development contributes to positive psychological outcomes. Simple efforts such as the public recognition of local storytelling campaigns would improve the way residents saw themselves within the broader tourism community.

Since sociological empowerment was significantly more positive for newer residents, there is a need to include long-term residents in tourism-centred programming. Tourism planners should consider supporting events that facilitate connection between long-term residents, new residents, and ecotourists. Similarly, to enhance cultural empowerment, practitioners could implement cultural heritage initiatives that engage long-term and rural residents more actively. For example, long-term residents can be engaged in the curation of cultural exhibits or as guides in cultural ecotours to ensure that their traditional knowledge is integrated into the ecotourism product. As this study and others suggest, specific efforts to improve environmental empowerment are central to resident empowerment though ecotourism. Since younger, more educated, and newer residents, reported higher levels of environmental empowerment, ecotourism planners should work to increase environmental empowerment among older, less educated, and long-term residents. This could mean providing hands-on engagement with conservation and tourism projects. Simply engaging these groups in environmental decision-making processes related to tourism may also increase their level of perceived empowerment.

Limitations and future research opportunities

At a time where it is becoming all too common to see articles utilizing multiple studies in various contexts, this work employs one study in a single context. This was intentionally done to highlight one case where ecotourism is being strongly encouraged, and therefore, empowerment is likely in a nascent stage. While we argue that our results are transferable to comparable contexts, findings may deviate in multiple contexts depending on residents' involvement in tourism, well-established ecotourism development, and the political structure of government within destinations (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017). Another limitation concerned the duration of data collection. Our initial aim was to collect data for roughly six months to ensure we had saturated the entire canton. Due to the length of the questionnaire (i.e. taking roughly 20 min to complete with the researcher oftentimes having to dictate questions) and many hard-to-reach homes, our data collection occurred over four months instead. Though we are confident our coverage represents the canton well due to the randomness of selecting residences, we would have preferred a larger sample. Additionally, though we considered numerous socio-demographic and socioeconomic measures within this study, we neglected to assess residents' perceived dependence upon tourism (i.e. percentage of household income derived indirectly or directly from tourism) or extant interaction with tourists (i.e. frequency of occurrence and quality of interaction). Such variables would likely provide an even

more intricate look at the heterogeneous perspectives of the six dimensions of empowerment among our sample of Ecuadorian residents.

To advance a particular measure, exploratory research should be undertaken incorporating socio-demographic and socioeconomic variables. Such an approach helps lay the groundwork to better determine external validity of the measure's use in multiple contexts. Though this is the second study to utilize the newly amended RETS (see Castillo-Vizuete et al., 2024), it marks another effort that successfully reinforces the application of the scale.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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