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The Confluence of Cultural Attitudes and Community Empowerment: Resident Support for Sustainable Heritage Tourism in Qufu, China

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ABSTRACT

Cultural heritage distinguishes itself from other tourist attractions because of its exceptional universal value, and empowerment plays a crucial role in advancing sustainable tourism development. In this context, this study aims to explore the direct and indirect relationships among residents' cultural attitudes, community empowerment, their perceptions of sustainable cultural heritage tourism, and their support for such tourism. To achieve this, the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) method was used to analyze data from 486 valid questionnaires collected in Lucheng Street, Qufu City. The results confirm that residents' cultural attitudes, community empowerment, and their perceptions of sustainable cultural heritage tourism significantly influence their support for it. Specifically, positive perceptions were found to mediate the relationship between residents' cultural attitudes and their support, as well as the relationship between community empowerment and support. Conversely, residents' negative perceptions only mediated the relationship between community empowerment and support. These findings enhance site managers' understanding of how to interpret and respond to residents' attitudes. They also provide practical insights for improving community management systems, balancing cultural heritage preservation with tourism sustainability.

文化态度与社区赋权的交融：中国曲阜居民对可持续遗产旅游的支持研究

文化遗产与一般旅游景点的根本区别，在于其具有独特的普遍价值。在这一背景下，社区赋权成为推动可持续旅游发展的关键力量。本研究旨在探讨居民文化态度、社区赋权、他们对可持续文化遗产旅游的认知，以及其支持行为之间的直接与间接关系。基于从曲阜市鲁城街道收集的486份有效问卷，研究采用偏最小二乘结构方程模型(PLS-SEM)进行数据分析。结果表明，居民的文化态度、社区赋权及其对可持续文化遗产旅游的认知，显著影响他们对相关旅游活动的支持程度。具体而言，积极的认知在居民文化态度与支持行为之间、以及社区赋权与支持行为之间均起到中介

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作用；而负面认知仅中介了社区赋权与支持行为之间的关系。这些发现有助于现场管理人员更准确地理解居民态度并作出响应，同时也为优化社区治理机制、平衡文化遗产保护与旅游可持续发展提供了实践启示。

Introduction

According to UNESCO, China holds the largest portfolio of World Heritage sites worldwide. As of March 2025, China had 59 designated sites across cultural, natural, and mixed categories, ranking second globally in total. These sites are vital resources for boosting tourism (Hosseini et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2019). While China's cultural heritage tourism is shifting toward high-quality development, ongoing challenges include heritage deterioration, inappropriate visitor behavior, over-commercialization, and conflicts over socio-cultural values (Yanying et al., 2025; Zhang & Cao, 2023). Therefore, sustainable development models are crucial to balance heritage preservation with the growth of regional tourism economies (Kim et al., 2019; Labadi et al., 2021; Mascaro, 2024).

As essential stakeholders in sustainable tourism governance, community residents significantly influence development outcomes (Abd Aziz et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2022). Tourism development generates substantial community benefits, including expanded employment opportunities (Egresi et al., 2021; Strzelecka et al., 2023), enhanced infrastructure, and improved quality of life (Luo et al., 2022). However, it concurrently induces adverse consequences such as traffic congestion, increased living costs (Egresi et al., 2021; Vinerean et al., 2021), and at cultural heritage sites specifically, cultural conflicts and structural degradation (Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar, Kock, et al., 2016). Empirical evidence confirms that resident support for tourism correlates positively with perceived benefits (Gannon et al., 2020; Tam et al., 2023), whereas negative perceptions diminish support willingness (Jiang et al., 2023; Latip et al., 2018). Consequently, sustainable cultural heritage tourism necessitates dual interventions: amplifying positive community impacts through heritage conservation while systematically mitigating adverse effects (Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar, Kock, et al., 2016).

Based on residents' perceptions of tourism development, previous studies have also investigated the effects of community attachment (Eslami et al., 2019; Kamrul Hassan et al., 2023; Shareef et al., 2025), community participation (Jiang et al., 2023; Wei et al., 2024), environmental attitudes (Hsu et al., 2019; Orgaz-Agüera et al., 2020), cultural attitudes (Gannon et al., 2020; Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar, Kock, et al., 2016), community empowerment (Gautam & Bhalla, 2024; Khalid et al., 2019), and sense of place (Ng & Feng, 2020) on residents' support for tourism development.

Despite advances in sustainable tourism research, few studies have examined factors specific to cultural heritage contexts – particularly those shaped by unique socio-political attributes. China's heritage sites exemplify this gap, embodying distinct Confucian cultural traditions that diverge from Western paradigms. Crucially, research emphasis remains disproportionately focused on tourist perspectives rather than site-specific resident dynamics (Xu & Sofield, 2013), resulting in three critical lacunae: (1) Insufficient investigation into how residents'

cultural attitudes influence support mechanisms; (2) Marginalization of resident agency in tourism governance, with limited empirical measurement of community empowerment (Li et al., 2024; Li et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2023). (3) Theoretical limitations of social exchange theory in addressing cultural and empowerment dimensions, necessitating complementary frameworks.

Furthermore, reliance primarily on Social Exchange Theory (SET) presents a notable theoretical limitation. While SET effectively captures the rational calculations of costs and benefits behind resident support (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2015), it fails to adequately address the influences of deep-rooted cultural identity, a non-rational, emotional factor, and structural power disparities that determine residents' ability to engage in equitable exchanges. Essentially, SET explains the economic aspects of resident support but fails to account for the underlying cultural and power dynamics. To overcome this, our research incorporates Community Empowerment Theory (CET) to consider power structures and Place Attachment Theory (PAT) to explore cultural and emotional bonds. We contend that this combined framework is not just additive but essential for developing a comprehensive understanding of resident support within the distinct socio-cultural environment of a World Heritage Site.

Thus, this study aims to elucidate the critical roles of cultural attitudes, community empowerment, and resident perceptions in advancing sustainable cultural heritage tourism. Specifically, the researcher empirically examines both direct and mediated pathways through which these factors shape residents' support for sustainable heritage tourism. The research objectives are formulated as follows:

(1) To examine the direct effects of cultural attitudes, community empowerment, positive perceptions, and negative perceptions on residents' support for sustainable cultural heritage tourism;
(2) To examine the mediating role of positive perceptions in the relationships linking:
    (a) cultural attitudes to support, and
    (b) community empowerment to support;

To examine the mediating function of negative perceptions in the relationships connecting:

(a) cultural attitudes to support, and
(b) community empowerment to support.

This study advances cultural heritage tourism research by examining how community empowerment and residents' cultural attitudes augment predictors of sustainable tourism support. The integration of multiple theoretical frameworks extends the field's conceptual foundations, while the dual-pathway analysis – incorporating both direct effects and perception-mediated mechanisms – enhances explanatory capacity beyond extant models. Practically, the operationalization of substantive empowerment factors refocuses managerial attention on residents' rights and capabilities, thereby informing evidence-based policy formulation for heritage governance.

Literature review

Theoretical framework

Various theories, including stakeholder theory (Abd Aziz et al., 2020; Hsu et al., 2019), planning behavior theory, and bottom-up spillover theory, have been used to analyze factors influencing residents' support for tourism development. Social exchange theory (SET) interprets this support as a rational decision based on a cost-benefit analysis. It suggests residents are more supportive when perceived tourism benefits outweigh the costs, and less supportive when costs surpass benefits (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Homans, 1958). SET is widely adopted to understand resident support as a rational choice, but its effectiveness is limited because it assumes individuals act rationally in a context lacking power structures. It neglects emotional and affective motivations, such as cultural pride, and structural barriers like limited political influence, which can hinder community participation despite potential benefits (Lv et al., 2019; Olya, 2023). In cultural heritage contexts, where values are symbolic and emotional, a solely utilitarian SET approach is inadequate (Gannon et al., 2020).

To address SET's oversight of structural barriers, we integrate Community Empowerment Theory (CET). CET emphasizes power redistribution and capacity building across economic, psychological, social, and political aspects (Boley et al., 2014; Scheyvens, 1999). Empirical evidence shows that adequate economic and psychological empowerment greatly increases residents' support for tourism development, while a lack of political empowerment can lead to feelings of alienation (Huizhan et al., 2015). CET clearly explains how reallocating power boosts resident agency. For example, missing political empowerment can cause alienation, hindering residents' participation in the exchanges described by SET (Huizhan et al., 2015). Therefore, CET establishes the structural foundations that allow SET's cost-benefit analyses to be meaningful.

To address non-economic, emotion-driven motivations, Place Attachment Theory (PAT) is incorporated. PAT explains how emotional connections and cultural identity (place identity) influence people's actions (Williams & Vaske, 2003). When residents see tourism as a way to maintain cultural continuity, those with a stronger sense of place are more likely to support development (Yi-Meng & Jin, 2022). This emotional motivation can operate independently of, or before, rational considerations, thus enhancing the economic-focused logic of SET with a powerful cultural and motivational aspect.

Social exchange theory highlights how residents' perceptions of tourism impacts influence their support levels. CET explains that redistributing power boosts resident support across economic, psychological, social, and political aspects (Moreira dos Santos et al., 2024; Zheng et al., 2023), especially useful for addressing the common problem of uneven benefit sharing in cultural heritage tourism (Chen et al., 2021). PAT combines emotional and rational viewpoints, aligning with social exchange theory's cost-benefit approach while offering a psychological basis for community empowerment. Together, these three theories form an integrated framework: SET provides the rationale for decision-making, CET focuses on power and agency influencing this process, and PAT adds emotional and cultural factors that may drive or override support. This combined approach offers a comprehensive, multi-dimensional understanding of resident support behaviors in cultural heritage contexts.

Residents' support for sustainable cultural heritage tourism

Resident support plays a vital role in tourism competitiveness and sustainable growth (Boukas, 2019). As key stakeholders and cultural custodians, destination communities serve a dual purpose as creators of socio-cultural capital and beneficiaries of tourism revenue (Soares et al., 2021). This support is expressed through three main dimensions: first, residents' willingness to share authentic cultural practices that provide immersive visitor experiences (Megeirhi et al., 2020; Ng & Feng, 2020); second, their active involvement in maintaining tourism infrastructure and public amenities (Stylidis et al., 2014); third, their acceptance that tourism-related externalities are balanced with perceived socio-economic benefits Jiang et al., 2023; Konar & Fuchs, 2025; M. Wang et al., 2021). Sustainable cultural heritage tourism requires simultaneously addressing socioeconomic needs, conserving the environment, and preserving cultural integrity (Sailesh & Reddy, 2023; Tahiri et al., 2022). While current research often focuses on general predictors like cost-benefit analysis (Hsu et al., 2019; Rasoolimanesh & Jaafar, 2016), involvement (participation) (Hatipoglu et al., 2016; Li & Hunter, 2015), and attachment (Elshaer et al., 2024), these frameworks fall short of capturing the specific cultural and political factors embedded in heritage contexts. To address this gap, this study incorporates cultural dispositions and community empowerment as key determinants of heritage-specific support mechanisms.

Cultural attitudes

Community cultural values manifest as place-based affective bonds that fundamentally shape residents' perceptions and behaviors (Moghavvemi et al., 2017; Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar, Kock, et al., 2016). Grounded in PAT, these emotionally grounded connections to heritage settings transcend economic calculus in cultural preservation decisions. Residents' cultural attitudes (CUA), conceptualized as their evaluative orientation toward place-embedded traditions and practices (Woosnam et al., 2018), function as expressions of place identity, significantly influencing tourism development trajectories. Within sustainable heritage contexts, stronger place attachment correlates with heightened stewardship consciousness and support for conservation-compatible tourism (Badulescu et al., 2023).

However, Gannon et al. (2020) demonstrated that the impact of CUA on the sustainable development of tourism is not as direct and significant as one might assume. Residents may be more focused on the commercialization and economic benefits of culture, believing that tourism development can generate more economic gains and jobs. For example, Wei et al. (2024) contend that residents prioritize the economic benefits of tourism over environmental and cultural concerns. Therefore, since Confucius sites deeply influence Chinese values, regardless of residents' attitudes toward Confucian culture related to sustainable tourism development, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H1: Cultural attitudes direct effect residents' support for sustainable cultural heritage tourism.

Community empowerment

Community empowerment (COE) in tourism refers to residents' meaningful participation in managing resources, covering development, utilization, and conservation – to ensure tourism outcomes benefit community well-being (Neuts et al., 2021; Strzelecka et al., 2017; Yasa, 2020). Its vital role in sustainable tourism development is supported by research, improving destination competitiveness while preserving cultural heritage and environmental health (Joo et al., 2019; Moreira dos; Santos et al., 2024; Bhutia & Konar, 2025). The connection between empowerment and support appears in different forms. Psychological empowerment consistently influences residents' support across various situations (Ranasinghe & Pradeepamali, 2019; Strzelecka et al., 2023). Social empowerment shows important but varied effects (Strzelecka et al., 2017, 2023). Political empowerment's importance depends on the specific context (Moreira dos Santos et al., 2024). Importantly, a sense of connection to nature enhances psychosocial pathways to support (Strzelecka et al., 2023). Given these mixed findings – especially in culturally sensitive heritage sites – this study explores how COE affects sustainable development at Confucian heritage sites. The hypothesis was as follows:

H2: Community empowerment direct effects residents' support for sustainable cultural heritage tourism.

Residents' perceptions and its mediating role

Residents' critical involvement in tourism development depends on their assessment of tourism's various impacts on livelihoods and community dynamics (Campón-Cerro et al., 2017). Perceptions of tourism impacts include cognitive evaluations of tourism phenomena and their consequences, serving as an indicator of residents' multidimensional assessments of destination development (Ravikumar et al., 2022). Empirical studies using structural equation modeling consistently show that these perceptions cover economic, sociocultural, and environmental aspects (Velinov et al., 2024). Scholarship commonly dichotomizes tourism impact perceptions into positive perceptions (PP) – indicating beneficial outcomes that improve community welfare – and negative perceptions (NP) – indicating harmful effects that reduce quality of life (Nugroho & Numata, 2020; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). Importantly, meta-analytic evidence confirms a positive relationship between PP and resident support, while the connection between NP and support is often inconsistent and not statistically significant (Nga et al., 2021; Nugroho & Numata, 2020; Pramanik & Rahman, 2023).

H3: Residents' positive perceptions direct effect their support for sustainable cultural heritage tourism development.

H4: Residents' negative perceptions direct effect their support for sustainable cultural heritage tourism.

Scholarship increasingly recognizes residents' perceptions as essential mediating factors in sustainable tourism development (Gannon et al., 2020; Nga et al., 2021), with empirical studies showing their mediating role between community participation and support (Lee, 2013); place attachment and support (Orgaz-Agüera et al., 2020); and economic benefit

perceptions and support (Hsu et al., 2019). However, significant gaps remain in understanding (1) the mediating function between CUA, COE, and support; and (2) the underexplored mediating potential of NP – especially given evidence that NP can have an influence equal to or greater than PP in certain context (Orgaz-Agüera et al., 2020). Therefore, the mediating roles of positive perceptions and negative perceptions are hypothesized as follows:

H5: Residents' positive perceptions mediate the relationship between cultural attitudes and support for sustainable cultural heritage tourism.

H6: Residents' positive perceptions mediate the relationship between community empowerment and support for sustainable cultural heritage tourism

H7: Residents' negative perceptions mediate the relationship between cultural attitudes and support for sustainable cultural heritage tourism.

H8: Residents' negative perceptions mediate the relationship between community empowerment and support for sustainable cultural heritage tourism.

The conceptual framework is based on the above hypothesis about the factors influencing residents' support for sustainable cultural heritage tourism and the mediating role of residents' positive and negative perceptions (Figure 1).

Methodology

Confucius site

This study focuses on Qufu's Confucian Heritage Site – the birthplace of Confucius (c. 551–479 BCE), whose philosophical system greatly influenced East Asian civilizations for over two thousand years (Weiming, 1989). The Confucius site examined in this study includes the Kong Family Mansion, Confucius Temple, and Cemetery of Confucius, all of which were inscribed together as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1994 (UNESCO,

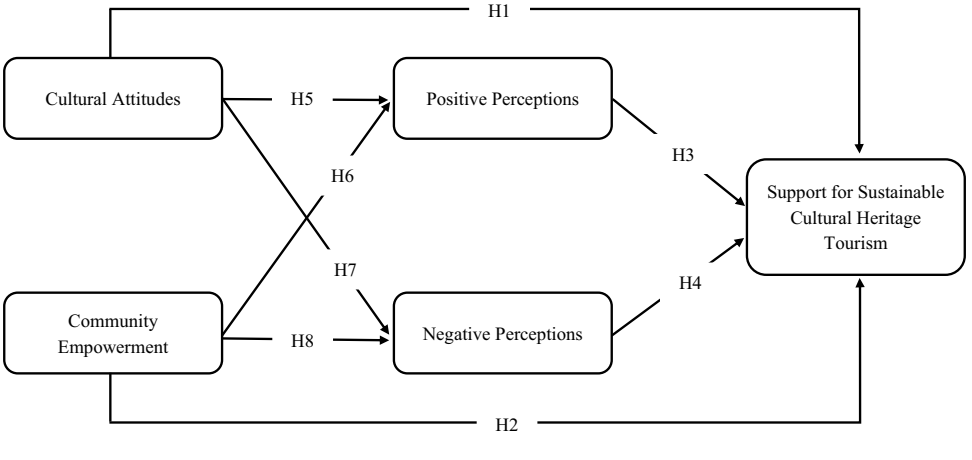

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

2023). The Confucius Temple was originally Confucius' residence, but after his death, it was converted into a place of worship. The Cemetery of Confucius is the world's largest intentional memorial garden, containing Confucius' tomb and lineage burials. The Kong Family Mansion exemplifies aristocratic architecture from the feudal era and served as the hereditary residence of Confucius' descendants. This site encompasses historic buildings, cultural relics, traditional customs, and folklore. Together, they represent traditional Chinese cosmology and state orthodoxy, blending architectural monuments, ritual objects, and intangible cultural practices (Li, 2021).

Given its unique characteristics, Qufu was chosen as the research site for three main reasons. First, its role as the center of Confucian civilization provides unmatched cultural depth and continuity, creating an ideal setting to explore cultural attitudes at the heart of our framework. Second, the complex governance stemming from the coexistence of state-led heritage management (Qufu Cultural Heritage Bureau) and family-based residential communities (descendants of Confucius) produces unique sociopolitical tensions (Xie & Li, 2021). Third, UNESCO's 2018 designation of Qufu as a 'Best Practice' site for community engagement guarantees the study's relevance and offers valuable insights into how perceptions develop under tourism pressures.

Research instrument

First-hand data were collected through a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire consists of three parts: an introduction, demographic information, and main items. The variable items were adopted from validated research. Among them, there are five items on cultural attitudes (Rasoolimanesh & Jaafar, 2016; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2015; Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar, Kock, et al., 2016), as well as positive perceptions and negative perceptions (Hateftabar & Chapuis, 2020; Rasoolimanesh & Jaafar, 2016; F. Wang & Luan, 2021). Six items on community empowerment are divided into three aspects: political, psychological, and social empowerment (Boley et al., 2014; Strzelecka et al., 2016, 2023). Finally, residents' support for sustainable cultural heritage tourism (SCHT) is reflected in six items (Demirović Bajrami et al., 2020; Eslami et al., 2018, 2019; Gautam, 2022). Respondents were encouraged to answer the questions in part three using a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being 'strongly disagree,' 2 being 'disagree,' 3 being 'neutral,' 4 being 'agree,' and 5 being 'strongly agree.'

Pilot test

Prior to the formal investigation, researchers carried out pretesting on the research instruments. This pretesting aimed to verify the discriminative ability of questionnaire items across different variables (Collins et al., 2003), detect issues in wording such as ambiguity, vagueness, and content gaps, and clarify misunderstandings between researchers and respondents (Presser et al., 2004). Through four-fold validation, including expert review, translation calibration, on-site feedback, and reliability testing, the pilot test thoroughly refined the content validity, cultural relevance, and practical feasibility of the questionnaire.

The pilot test was carried out in Lucheng Street, where the Confucius relics are located, in March 2023. A total of 42 valid questionnaires were collected, which meets the sample size

standard of 20–50 proposed by Sudman (1983) and ensures both representativeness and practicality. The Cronbach's Alpha (CA) coefficient was used to assess reliability, covering 27 items across 5 variables: CUA, PP, NP, COE, and SCHT. The results showed that the CA coefficients for all variables were ≥0.763. Specifically, the CA coefficients for CUA (0.834), COE (0.850), NP (0.829), and SCHT (0.891) were all above 0.8, indicating high reliability; the CA coefficient for PP (0.763) ranged between 0.7 and 0.8, indicating good reliability. All variables met the reliability standards proposed by George & Mallery (2019), confirming that all 37 items of the questionnaire possess acceptable reliability and can be used directly in the formal study.

Data collection

The target population consisted of residents at the Confucius site in Qufu. Respondents were over 18 years old, with no restrictions on gender, occupation, education level, or income. Twenty-six residential communities in Lucheng Street, where the site is located, were sampled. A stratified random sampling method was used (Lee, 2013; Thetsane, 2019) to ensure geographical representation. According to China's Seventh Population Census in 2020, the total permanent population of Lucheng Street was 32,914. The sample size calculator by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) indicated that at least 380 valid responses were needed. Data collection occurred between April and May 2023. During questionnaire distribution, local community committee members assisted with communication. Face-to-face questionnaires were distributed according to each community's sample size and collected on-site. Ultimately, 486 valid questionnaires were obtained. The sample size was deemed acceptable based on the minimum sample size and the 'ten times rule' for partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) (Chin, 1998b; Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar, Kock, et al., 2016).

Data analysis

PLS-SEM was adopted to analyze the relationship between variables. It was chosen because it supports theory development, extension, and prediction (Hair et al., 2011). As a comprehensive multivariate statistical method, PLS-SEM includes the assessment of both measurement and structural models. The measurement model focuses on the latent variables (LVs) to evaluate their validity and reliability. The structural model assessment examines the relationships between LVs (Esposito Vinzi et al., 2009; Hair et al., 2011). This study used Smart PLS, the most popular PLS-SEM analysis software (Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar, Kock, et al., 2016; Sarstedt & Cheah, 2019).

Results

Profile of respondents

The profiles of the respondents are summarized in Table 1. In terms of gender, the proportion of male respondents (N = 251, 51.6%) was slightly higher than that of females (N = 235, 48.4%). One-third of the respondents were aged 30–39 years (N = 162). The respondents were primarily middle-aged and young. More than half of the respondents (63.2%) held a diploma or higher educational qualification. Regarding monthly income

Table 1. Profile of respondents.

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	251	51.6
Female	235	48.4
Age (years)		
18–29	111	22.8
30–39	162	33.3
40–49	99	20.4
50–59	85	17.5
60 and above	29	6.0
Education		
Below junior middle school	34	7.0
Junior middle school	76	15.6
Senior middle school	69	14.2
Diploma degree	97	20.0
Bachelor degree	151	31.1
Master degree	59	12.1
Income (CNY) per month		
Below 2,000	28	5.8
2,000–3.999	51	10.5
4,000–5,999	124	25.5
6,000–7,999	100	20.6
8,000–9,999	112	23.0
10,000 and above	71	14.6
Length of residency (Years)		
Below 10	163	33.5
10–19	113	23.3
20–29	89	18.3
30–39	84	17.3
40–49	15	3.1
50 and above	22	4.5
Occupation		
Related to tourism	229	47.1
Others	257	52.9

Note: CNY 6.98 = USD 1.00 (at the time of thesis writing).

(RMB), the distribution across three ranges – 4000–5999 (N = 124, 25.5%), 6000–7999 (N = 100, 20.6%), and 8000–999 (N = 112, 23%) – showed that over 20% fell into each category, with the 4000–5999 range accounting for 25.5%. One-third (N = 163, 33.5%) of the respondents had been living in their local community for 10 years or less. Additionally, there were 28 more respondents whose occupations were unrelated to tourism (N = 257, 52.9%) than those related to tourism (N = 229, 47.1%).

Assessment of the measurement model

This section presents an assessment of the measurement model with five reflective latent variables (LVs). Reliability was assessed through the consistency of LV items and overall structural reliability, while validity was tested via convergence and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2011, Nga et al., 2021; Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar, Kock, et al., 2016). To evaluate item reliability, each item should have a factor loading of ≥0.7 on its corresponding LV (Ali et al., 2018; Hair et al., 2011). Items with loadings ≤ 0.4 should be removed from the model (Hair et al., 2011). As shown in Table 2, all items except for COE2, had loadings ≥0.7. Although the loading of COE2 (0.696) was below the ideal threshold of 0.7, it was retained because the

Table 2. Results of the measurement model.

Construct	Item	Loading	Cronbach α	CR	AVE
Cultural Attitude			**0.892**	**0.920**	**0.698**
	CUA 1. I believe that the local culture and traditional culture should be protected and preserved	0.821			
	CUA 2. I believe that preserving the lifestyle of the residents will increase residents' support for tourism development	0.834			
	CUA 3. I believe that the diversity of local culture and heritage should be valued and protected	0.836			
	CUA 4. Preservation of my traditional culture is very important to me	0.842			
	CUA 5. I believe it is our responsibility to preserve local traditions and culture for future generations.	0.843			
Community Empowerment			**0.858**	**0.894**	**0.585**
	COE 1. I feel like I have a voice in Confucius Sites tourism development decisions	0.733			
	COE 2. I feel like my vote vote makes a difference in how tourism is developed in Confucius Sites	0.696			
	COE 3. Tourism in Confucius Site makes me feel proud and special as people travel to see unique features in my area.	0.794			
	COE 4. Tourism in Confucius Site reminds me that I have a unique culture to share with visitors	0.800			
	COE 5. Tourism in Confucius Site makes me feel more connected and involved with my community.	0.777			
	COE 6. Tourism in Confucius Site fosters a sense of 'community spirit' within me	0.784			
Positive Perception			**0.837**	**0.885**	**0.606**
	PP 1. Tourism development creates jobs and increases investments in the Confucius Sites	0.772			
	PP 2. Tourism development improves the living standards of the residents at the Confucius Sites	0.801			
	PP 3. Tourism development increases the number of infrastructure and public facilities	0.779			
	PP 4. Tourism development increases cultural exchanges between tourists and the residents at the Confucius Sites	0.800			
	PP 5. Tourism development increases the cultural identity of tourists at the Confucius Sites	0.737			
Negative Perception			**0.892**	**0.920**	**0.698**
	NP 1. Tourism development increases the cost of living at Confucius Site	0.808			
	NP 2. Tourism development leads to traffic jams, noise and pollution at Confucius Site	0.830			
	NP 3. Tourism development destroys traditions and local culture at Confucius Site	0.851			
	NP 4. The construction of tourist facilities destroys cultural buildings and cultural environment in Confucius Site	0.859			
	NP 5. Tourism development increases cultural conflict between residents and tourists in Confucius Site	0.828			
Support for Sustainable Cultural Heritage Tourism			**0.876**	**0.906**	**0.618**
	SCHT 1. I support the development of community-based sustainable tourism initiatives at Confucius Site	0.764			
	SCHT 2. My participation in the tourism-related plans and development at the Confucius Sites helps sustain local sociocultural values and traditions	0.802			
	SCHT 3. My participation in sustainable tourism-related activities at the Confucius Sites aids cultural exchanges between the residents and visitors	0.793			
	SCHT 4. My participation in sustainable tourism-related activities at the Confucius Sites helps promote environmental education and conservation among communities	0.816			

(*Continued*)

Table 2. (Continued).

Construct	Item	Loading	Cronbach α	CR	AVE
	SCHT 5. My support of the regulatory environmental standards at the Confucius Sites helps reduce the negative impacts of tourism	0.789			
	SCHT 6. My participation in the heritage tourism conservation programmes at the Confucius Sites supports the sustainable tourism initiative	0.751			

composite reliability (CR = 0.894) and average variance extracted (AVE = 0.585) for the COE construct both met the acceptable standards (CR ≥ 0.7, AVE ≥ 0.5). Therefore, COE2 was not excluded. In short, the reliability of all LV items was acceptable.

Cronbach's alpha and CR evaluate structural reliability (Gannon et al., 2020; Kock, 2014; Nga et al., 2021). The Cronbach's α ranges from 0 to 1; the closer it is to 1, the stronger the internal consistency and the higher the reliability. Cronbach's α and CR should be at least 0.7 to confirm structural reliability (Hair et al., 2011). As indicated in Table 2, the Cronbach's alpha values (0.837–0.892) and CR values (0.885–0.920) for all five structures exceeded 0.7, demonstrating high structural reliability.

AVE assesses convergent validity (Esposito Vinzi et al., 2009). For acceptable convergent validity, the AVE should be ≥0.5 (Hair et al., 2011; Orgaz-Agüera et al., 2020; Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar, Kock, et al., 2016). The AVE range of 0.585–0.698 indicated that each construct demonstrated adequate convergent validity.

Discriminant validity evaluates how well each LV differs from others in the model (Esposito Vinzi et al.,, 2009) and ensures items across different structures do not overlap in meaning (Kock, 2014). The square root of the AVE for each construct should be greater than the highest correlation between that construct and others (Hair et al., 2011; Kock, 2014). Table 3 shows that the square root of the AVE for each LV exceeded the highest correlation among the LVs, indicating good discriminant validity.

Assessment of the structural model

The evaluation of the structural model involved testing the causality between the LVs. This study used the bootstrapping algorithm in SmartPLS 3.0. to set a significance level of 0.05 and 5000 sub-sample operations to test the relationship between the LVs (Hair et al., 2017). The coefficient of determination (R^2) indicates the explanatory ability and reflects the goodness-of-fit of a model. Chin (1998a) put the substantial value at 0.670, the moderate at 0.333, and the weak value below 0.190. The endogenous LVs in this study

Table 3. Discriminant validity.

Constructs	COE	CUA	NP	PP	SCHT
COE	**0.765**				
CUA	0.562	**0.835**			
NP	−0.314	−0.236	**0.835**		
PP	0.625	0.604	−0.275	**0.778**	
SCHT	0.671	0.602	−0.306	0.644	**0.786**

were the PP, NP, and support for SCHT. Table 4 shows that the PP (0.484) and SCHT (0.567) had relatively high and acceptable R^2 values, while NP (0.104) had a low R^2 value, thus indicating that CUA and COE had a reasonable explanation for the SCHT, followed by PP. However, CUA and COE did not explain the residents' NP well.

The path coefficient was used to illustrate the relationship between the LVs in the model. The *P* of the path coefficient test was used to determine whether a hypothesis was significant. Table 5 and Figure 2 show the results of the proposed hypotheses. The influence of CUA on PP was significant. However, its effect on NP was not substantial. This did not affect the considerable influence of CUA on SCHT ($\beta = 0.226$; $t = 5.097$). The impacts of COE on PP, COE on NP, and COE on SCHT ($\beta = 0.357$; $t = 8.677$) were significant. The difference was that the effect of COE on NP was negative. Additionally, residents' perceptions had a substantial impact on SCHT. Positive perceptions (PP)

Table 4. R^2 and Q^2.

Variables	R^2	Q^2
PP	0.484	0.320
NP	0.104	0.070
SCHT	0.567	0.391

Table 5. Results of hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis		Path Coefficient (β)	Confidence Interval (95%) Bias Corrected	T-statistic (t)	P-value	Supported
H1	CUA → SCHT	0.226	[0.139, 0.312]	5.097	***	YES
H2	COE → SCHT	0.357	[0.276, 0.434]	8.677	***	YES
H3	PP → SCHT	0.266	[0.184, 0.344]	6.469	***	YES
H4	NP → SCHT	−0.067	[−0.130, −0.005]	2.069	*	YES
H5	CUA → PP → SCHT	0.098	[0.062, 0.137]	5.166	**	YES
H6	COE → PP → SCHT	0.111	[0.073, 0.155]	5.280	**	YES
H7	CUA → NP → SCHT	0.006	[−0.001, 0.018]	1.196	0.232	NO
H8	COE → NP → SCHT	0.018	[0.001, 0.030]	1.909	*	YES

Note: ***$p < 0.001$. **$p < 0.01$. *$p < 0.05$.

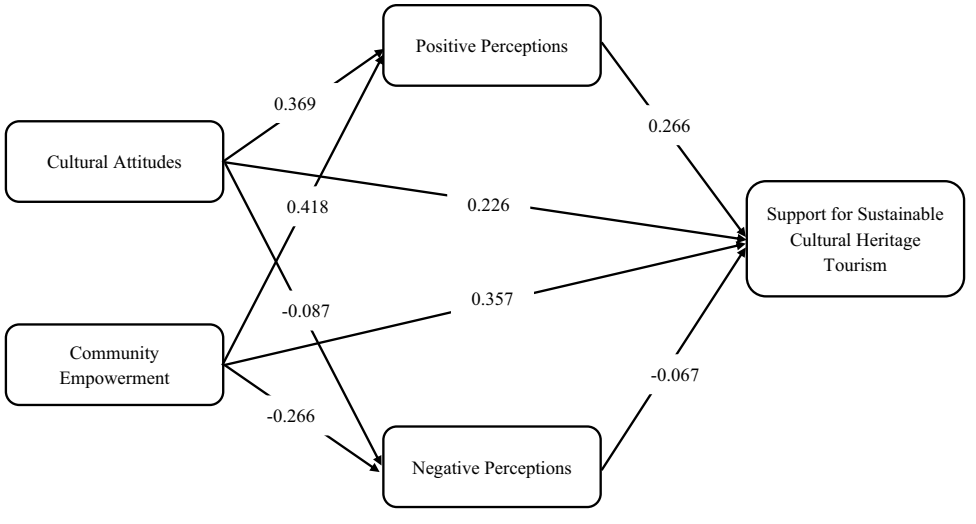

Figure 2. Result of structural model.

toward SCHT were positive (β = 0.266; $t = 6.469$), while negative perceptions (NP) toward SCHT were negative (β = −0.067; $t = 2.069$). To summarize, CUA, COE, PP, and NP significantly affected SCHT. Therefore, this study's H1, H2, H3, and H4 were supported.

To evaluate the mediating effects, the product of coefficients approach (indirect effect) was used to assess the significance of indirect effects employing bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (Zhao et al., 2010). These results confirmed the mediating role of residents' PP and NP. As shown in Table 5, the mediating effect of PP on the relationship between CUA, COE, and SCHT was much stronger than that of NP. The 2.5 and 97.5 percentiles were then calculated to establish a 95% confidence interval for each indirect effect. Zhao et al. (2010) suggested that the indirect impact is significant if the 95% confidence interval of the bias correction does not include 0. The mediating effects of the variables were confirmed. As seen in Table 5, the confidence intervals for H5, H6, and H8 did not include 0. Therefore, PP mediated the relationship between CUA, SCHT, and COE, as well as SCHT. Additionally, NP played a supplementary mediating role in the relationship between COE and SCHT because COE negatively influenced NP, and NP negatively impacted SCHT. Thus, H5, H6, and H8 were supported.

Discussion

The significant direct influence of cultural attitudes (CUA) on support (H1) highlights the importance of incorporating Place Attachment Theory. Although a strict SET perspective would predict this link to be entirely mediated by perceived benefits viewed as a rational decision, our results imply that, in deeply cultural settings like Qufu, cultural pride can directly motivate support. This suggests that cultural identity alone can serve as a primary, non-exchange-based motivator, challenging a purely utilitarian SET approach and emphasizing the significance of PAT's emotional aspects. As Yang and Wall (2022) established, cultural identity and pride constitute critical drivers of resident backing for cultural heritage tourism. Specifically, cultural attitudes not only directly shape supportive behaviors but also indirectly foster such support by strengthening emotional attachment to cultural heritage. This phenomenon may stem from the profound cultural pride and identity observed among residents at the Confucius site. Such direct effects manifest as resident endorsement of traditional culture preservation, lifestyle continuity, cultural site protection, and sustainable tourism advancement.

This study confirms that community empowerment influences residents' support for sustainable cultural heritage tourism. While psychological empowerment effects are well-established (Neuts et al., 2021; Ranasinghe & Pradeepamali, 2019; Strzelecka et al., 2023), the key role of political empowerment highlights unique governance advantages at World Heritage sites. Both psychological empowerment (like increased self-efficacy) and political empowerment (such as participating in decision-making) are crucial drivers of support for sustainable tourism. This aligns with Scheyvens and van der Watt (2021), who argue that community empowerment enhances development support by increasing residents' agency in resource management and policy involvement. Mature tourism destinations (Kumar et al., 2023) tend to exhibit stronger community empowerment, with local impacts amplified when residents have greater control over management.

The mediating role of positive perceptions confirms an important pathway in SET: both cultural attitudes and empowerment influence residents' support by fostering positive evaluations of tourism benefits. Conversely, the non-significant mediating effect of negative perceptions between CUA and support provides an important theoretical insight, suggesting that a strong cultural identity can serve as a psychological buffer, disconnecting negative impacts from support decline (Yi et al., 2024). This deepens our understanding of PAT by showing that place attachment not only promotes support but can also diminish the effects of externalities, offering a more nuanced perspective beyond the original theory. Gao and Lin emphasize that empowerment encompasses more than practical usefulness, including emotional and cognitive dimensions that shape residents' perceptions. Cultural attitudes are adaptable ideas that can guide specific actions through perceptual processes like positive evaluation. Additionally, the effectiveness of empowerment depends on how residents interpret their perceptions (Yang & Zhang, 2024). Notably, the absence of negative perception mediation indicates that cultural attitudes are not associated with negative judgments, and residents remain open to cultural expression despite tourism impacts. Strengthening community empowerment and reducing negative perceptions could thus be vital for maintaining support for Confucius sites.

Additionally, evidence suggests a possible feedback loop between cultural attitudes and community empowerment: a strong cultural awareness can increase the desire for empowerment, which in turn further strengthens cultural commitment. The presence of both positive and negative perception pathways illustrates a dual mediation model, where resident support depends on a balancing of these perceptual forces.

Conclusion

Theoretical contributions

This study provides several key theoretical insights that extend beyond confirming existing relationships. It questions and enhances how current theories are applied in sustainable cultural heritage tourism.

First, it strongly advocates for a multi-theoretical approach, moving past the limitations of relying solely on SET. While SET explains the rational basis for support, our results demonstrate that its explanation is incomplete without incorporating Place Attachment Theory (PAT) and CET. The significant direct effects of cultural attitudes (a PAT element) and community empowerment (a CET element) on support indicate that residents' behaviors are influenced not only by cost-benefit considerations but also by emotional bonds and structural engagement capacity. This addresses key critiques that SET overlooks non-economic values and structural barriers (Lv et al., 2019; Olya, 2023), providing a more comprehensive framework for future research in culturally sensitive settings.

Second, the study clarifies and confirms the specific mechanisms within these theories that are most relevant for heritage governance. We move beyond viewing 'empowerment' and 'place attachment' as single, uniform concepts. Our findings reveal that within CET, political empowerment and participation in decision-

making are critical yet often neglected aspects of heritage management. This supports the idea that redistribution of power is crucial; without political agency, the psychological and economic benefits of empowerment may not sustain support. In PAT, the cultural-identity component of place attachment, such as pride in Confucian heritage, can directly influence behavior, not just indirectly through perceptions. This refines PAT by suggesting that, in culturally significant contexts, emotional bonds can be so powerful that they overshadow the perceptual mechanisms typically linked with SET.

Lastly, and most importantly, the analysis of mediation effects provides a new theoretical insight: the identification of an asymmetrical mediation pattern. The finding that negative perceptions (NP) do not mediate the relationship between cultural attitudes and support, but do mediate the link between empowerment and support, is critical. It introduces the concept of a 'cultural buffer,' where a strong, identity-based attachment to place can shield resident support from the adverse effects of tourism-related negative impacts. This indicates that the relationship between perceived costs and support is not universal but varies depending on the cultural context.

Practical implications

These findings have important implications for community development and tourism governance practitioners. The study confirms that residents' cultural attitudes and empowerment mechanisms are key factors influencing sustainable tourism outcomes at the Confucius site. To gain resident support, government and heritage management groups should focus on comprehensive interventions: (1) Developing cultural preservation strategies that safeguard both physical structures and intangible traditions and lifestyles. (2) Launching participatory cultural programs to enhance residents' cultural understanding, strengthen collective identity, and foster place attachment. (3) Establishing formal empowerment structures through grassroots initiatives to institutionalize community decision-making power.

Limitations and future research

This study advances sustainable tourism development but faces certain limitations. The observed impact of cultural attitudes and community empowerment on resident support contradicts some earlier findings, possibly due to the unique historical context of Confucian heritage sites. Therefore, further research is needed into how perceptions of tourism development vary among residents from different cultural backgrounds and regions.

Additionally, the study did not consider the moderating effects of community traits and sociodemographic factors. Future studies should explicitly explore whether variables such as residents' age, income, education, and length of residence significantly influence their support and participation levels.

Moreover, resident support for sustainable tourism is a complex social phenomenon. Relying solely on quantitative methods and statistical analysis to identify relationships limits understanding. Future research would benefit from incorporating qualitative or

mixed-methods approaches, which can offer deeper insights into how these relationships develop within specific local contexts and what they mean for resident support dynamics.

Disclosure statement

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

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