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Sustainable Development through Community Involvement in Tourism Planning: The Role of Ecotourism Motivation and Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the nexus between natural attraction, ecotourism motivation, social, psychological and political empowerment, community involvement in tourism planning, and support for sustainable ecotourism development. Underpinned by ecological modernisation and empowerment theories, this study addresses the lack of community participation, especially in the context of nature-based destinations and ecotourism. Such dynamics are important to analyse, given that communities are considered vital cogs in the collaborative governance and sustainability of the ecotourism industry. Using the quantitative research design with purposive sampling, the study examined four hundred four (404) responses via Partial-least Square-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) assessment. The study found that natural attraction significantly influences ecotourism motivation. The latter construct negatively affects community involvement in tourism planning, with social empowerment as a significant moderator. The result concludes that community involvement in tourism planning has a significant influence on sustainable ecotourism development. Theoretically, this study is novel in its application of ecological modernisation

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theory within the context of tourism, particularly in wetland-based destinations, and in integrating empowerment theory to examine how distinct empowerment dimensions shape community involvement. These findings offer valuable and unique insights into the psychological behaviour of communities regarding tourism destination planning and development.

Keywords: Community involvement, ecological modernisation theory, ecotourism motivation, empowerment, natural attraction, support for sustainable tourism development, tourism planning

INTRODUCTION

The growth of sustainable tourism has been monumental in the last three decades, and most empirical and conceptual works have focused on tripartite components of the environment, sociocultural, and economy (Nunkoo & So, 2016; Zakaria et al., 2024). In establishing a model of sustainable tourism development, communities have always been one of the main actors analysed in the context of anticipated industry advantages and disadvantages relative to the tripartite components (see Eslami et al., 2019). This is because sustainable tourism development depends on involved and supportive communities to stay competitive in the contemporary, dynamic, and diverse tourism market (Aleshinloye et al., 2021). Communities are considered the main stakeholders in tourism development, given their behaviours and attitudes, which are pivotal factors in shaping the destination's achievement and sustainability (Li et al., 2022). This represents the position of collective decision-making between the tourism stakeholders since bottom-up approaches are increasingly understood as critical to sustainable tourism development (Azwar et al., 2023).

In this vein, soliciting the community's backing and understanding is deemed to be germane to all tourism actors to establish viable and sustainable tourism planning (Aleshinloye et al., 2021; Azwar et al., 2023). To assess the extent of their support for tourism, many scholars begin with the communities' belief in travel and the formulation of their perceptions of the industry and its following development (Gannon et al., 2021). This illustrates the heightened need for communities' support for sustainable tourism development, considering that they are the primary beneficiaries of the expected pros and cons of the industry (Zaman & Aktan, 2021).

Based on this premise, it is crucial to consider the impact that tourism has on the community in the context of destination management. If the negative impact outweighs the positive impact, it can lead to friction between communities and tourists and potentially harm the community's way of life (Zakaria et al., 2024). Some communities may view tourism development negatively due to concerns about negative effects on local heritage, culture, and the environment. On the other hand, others may see it as a source of positive effects such as enhanced employment prospects, increased tax

revenue, income from abroad, the formation of local businesses, and better profits (Seraphin et al., 2019). Such dynamics may shape the community's involvement in the decision-making and execution of tourism policies since the design of the power structures and processes is a necessity in tourism governance (Bichler, 2021; Dedeoğlu et al., 2023).

This explicates the increasing volume of empirical works on different levels of community support for tourism development, as a plethora of attributes were analysed in various rural and urban settings. The attributes include place image (Zaman & Aktan, 2021), community attachment (Eslami et al., 2019), perceived value and impact (Tosun et al., 2021), cultural attitudes (Gannon et al., 2021), community identity, attitudes, and satisfaction (Ramkissoon & Nunkoo, 2011). Furthermore, it is worth noting that a substantial body of literature has separately assessed the general status of sustainable tourism and its impact on the satisfaction of both residents and tourists in ecotourism and nature-based settings, including studies applying the Prism of Sustainability model, which extends the conventional economic, ecological, and sociocultural dimensions with an institutional dimension (Gong et al., 2023; Spangenberg, 2002). Despite the scale of empirical evidence in this area, there is still a scarcity of studies centred on the antecedents of community involvement and their support for tourism development in an ecotourism destination. Underexplored and understudied, Ali et al. (2020) review of modern empirical literature highlights the need for more natural environment-related determinants of community involvement in tourism planning and its outcome. They also highlighted specifically the need for more empirical explorations on the dynamics between natural attraction and the underlying motivation that subsequently shapes community involvement in tourism planning.

Such need stems from the possibility of the communities becoming ambassadors if there is an increased consciousness of their environments' positive elements (Aleshinloye et al., 2021). Since communities are considered a vital cog in the success of the ecotourism industry, it is postulated that their involvement in planning and development is crucial in creating an empowered community, which is needed in collaborative governance and sustainability efforts to promote tourism (Ali et al., 2020; Aleshinloye et al., 2021). Accordingly, such dynamics have motivated the current paper to analyse a conceptual model that illustrates how empowerment can moderate the community's motivation for ecotourism and their involvement in tourism planning. The model starts with natural attractions and examines how they contribute to this relationship, ultimately leading to community support for sustainable tourism development. To support all the proposed interrelationships, the theories of ecological modernisation (EMT) and empowerment are used to establish a coherent and rational theoretical framework that explains the model. While EMT and empowerment

theory jointly assume that heightened environmental awareness and empowerment translate directly into greater community participation, this assumption has rarely been tested against the structural realities of formal tourism planning systems, where participatory ideals are often constrained by bureaucratic barriers and top-down governance arrangements (Bichler, 2021; Osman et al., 2018). This unresolved tension between theory and governance practice constitutes the specific theoretical gap this study addresses, as it remains unclear whether, and under what conditions, motivated and empowered communities actually translate their disposition into formal involvement in tourism planning.

With this in mind, the following section addresses the literature review of the key constructs before dissecting the role of EMT and empowerment theory in detail. The paper then discusses the development of hypotheses, methodology, and study results. In conclusion, the paper includes a discussion that addresses both theoretical and practical implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Natural Attraction and Ecotourism Motivation

The appeal of natural tourism stems from the availability of diverse natural attractions, which are shaped by the beauty and distinctiveness of natural resources and the socio-cultural heritage of local communities. These attractions encompass many landscapes, including mountains, lakes, forests, and beaches, all home to rich biodiversity and wildlife (Connell et al., 2015). Nature-based attractions are particularly significant in ecotourism as they drive tourism-related activities and contribute to economic growth (Ali et al., 2020). Furthermore, these attractions are essential in encouraging local community participation in ecotourism initiatives, ultimately fostering long-term sustainability and conservation efforts (Ali et al., 2020).

Accordingly, motivation is critical in driving such participation in tourism activities, as it is often perceived as a psychological need and desire that triggers behavioural responses (Belly et al., 2024; Pearce, 2013). Motivation takes on additional dimensions within ecotourism, as it is closely linked to environmental responsibility, cultural appreciation, and community well-being. This is consistent with the aim of ecotourism, which is to minimise the negative ecological impacts of tourism while enhancing the well-being of local communities, making it a key motivator for regional participation in tourism development (Agaliotou et al., 2019).

Community Empowerment

Empowerment involves individuals or groups striving to shape their circumstances by increasing their internal strength and ability to influence their surroundings in response to external factors (Strzelecka et al., 2017). It enables communities to articulate their perspectives and advocate for initiatives contributing to their well-being and success.

Through this process, communities become active agents in decision-making, problem-solving, and implementing resolutions, positioning themselves at the highest level of participation (Boley & McGehee, 2014). In sustainable tourism, ecotourism should empower local communities, enabling them to gain from tourism activities and participate in shaping their socio-economic progress (Das & Chatterjee, 2020).

Scheyvens (1999) made a significant contribution to tourism literature by introducing the concept of empowerment, which encompasses four key dimensions comprise of economic, social, political, and psychological. Building on this foundational premise, the Resident Empowerment through Tourism Scale (RETS) was created by Boley and McGehee (2014), which incorporates tripartite components of psychological, social, and political empowerment. Since its inception, the employment of RETS has increased, and it is considered to be one of the extensively operationalised measures of the concept of empowerment within the realm of tourism (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017). In fact, such employment has been demonstrated using the scale as a precursor to various outcome measures (Aleshinloye et al., 2021).

These dimensions are particularly significant in ecotourism since they ensure active participation from the community and enhance its importance (Tang & Wang, 2017). Accordingly, psychological empowerment is reflected in the self-esteem of individuals and groups, which strengthens as they gain recognition for their unique identities, cultural values, traditional knowledge, and natural resources (Hidayat, 2017). Political empowerment, on the other hand, ensures that governance structures are equitable and responsive to the diverse requirements and concerns of all community groups (Scheyvens & Watt, 2021). While social empowerment is crucial in fostering community structure and integrity, strengthening social bonds and collective resilience (Butler, 2017).

Community Involvement and Support for Sustainable Tourism Development

Community engagement entails bringing residents together to achieve shared objectives, enhance the local area, and pursue personal aspirations (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). Local communities are directly affected, both positively and negatively, by tourism growth and the resulting interactions (Strickland-Munro et al., 2010), and these transformations can influence community values, lifestyles, and overall quality of life (Hu et al., 2022). Tourism planning should be a primary focus and be adopted and practised extensively within a community (Chatkaewnapanon & Lee, 2022). Besides, Osman et al. (2018) suggested that protecting nature and culture to benefit residents, along with the involvement of local communities, relevant stakeholders, and government bodies, is crucial for the success of ecotourism.

Furthermore, sustainable tourism's success largely depends on residents' active participation and support, making their involvement a critical factor in its

development. Research indicates that community members are generally more favourable towards tourist development when they perceive it as a catalyst for financial increase (Linderová et al., 2021). This highlighted the importance of residents' support for sustainable tourism, underscoring that their involvement in decision-making is crucial in ensuring long-term tourism sustainability.

Underpinning Theory

Introduced by sociologists like Joseph Huber, Martin Jänicke, and Udo Simonis in the 1980s, EMT was initially sought to frame the dynamics of environmental policies in Western Europe (Jänicke, 2008). Over the years, however, it has transformed into a broader theory of social change and political strategy (Sezgin, 2013). At its core, EMT posits that environmental challenges found in the existing socio-economic and political framework can be addressed by modernising and restructuring economies at both micro and macro levels. This involves weaving ecological considerations into production, consumption, and policymaking, harmonising environmental and economic rationalities (Mol, 1995). In recent years, the principles of ecological modernisation have captured global attention, emerging as a pivotal approach to sustainable development. According to Ali et al. (2020), a significant application of this theory is found in tourism, particularly in concepts such as sustainable tourism and ecotourism, which closely align with the principles of EMT. This connection arises from the understanding that the natural attractions of an ecotourism destination are fundamentally nature-based resources. These resources involve human interaction in the shape of community participation and illustrate how EMT supports these dynamics. Nevertheless, EMT's optimistic assumption that modernised, participatory structures will automatically translate environmental awareness into community action rests on the premise of accessible and responsive governance arrangements. Where this premise does not hold, the theory itself points to a boundary condition rather than a contradiction.

To draw a more comprehensive picture of this dynamic, the empowerment theory is integrated to further extend the application of EMT in ecotourism via a showcase of the moderating effects of politics, psychology, and society. Integrating empowerment theory can be linked to its application within the tourism literature, which is widely recognised as a critical element of sustainable tourism (Boley & McGehee, 2014). Specifically, empowerment theory has proven valuable in shedding light on the perceptions of the residents on their empowerment and how such feelings shape their decisions regarding activities within the realm of tourism, namely advocating for proper tourism development (Gautam & Bhalla, 2024). Therefore, merging empowerment theory with EMT is considered a novel and coherent approach. Since empowerment theory focuses on human interaction as well, it serves as a useful framework for exploring its impact on individuals' decision-making in tourism (Aleshinloye et al., 2022).

Beyond the general premise of EMT and empowerment theory, this study also draws on the concept of participatory governance to explain why increased motivation may not automatically translate into greater community involvement. Participatory governance emphasises the co-design of power structures and decision-making processes between the state, private actors, and communities, positioning residents as genuine partners rather than passive recipients of tourism policy (Bichler, 2021). However, the practical realisation of participatory ideals is frequently constrained by bureaucratic barriers embedded within formal planning systems, including rigid administrative procedures, unclear channels for community input, and the dominance of top-down decision-making structures (Osman et al., 2018). Such structural constraints can create a disconnect between the community's underlying motivation to engage with ecotourism and their actual involvement in formal tourism planning processes, as motivated residents may perceive limited opportunities for their participation to have meaningful influence over planning outcomes (Dedeoğlu et al., 2023). This tension between motivation and structurally-limited participation provides a theoretical basis for anticipating that the relationship between ecotourism motivation and community involvement in tourism planning, as well as its interaction with community empowerment dimensions, may not always follow the straightforward positive pattern assumed within EMT and empowerment theory.

Community-based tourism (CBT) further complements this discussion, as it conceptualises local communities not merely as beneficiaries of tourism development but as principal agents responsible for planning, managing, and benefiting from tourism activities within their own locality (Azwar et al., 2023). CBT approaches emphasise fusing local wisdom, customary decision-making structures, and cooperative arrangements with formal governance mechanisms, a proposition particularly relevant to ecotourism destinations such as wetlands, where the sustainability of natural resources is closely intertwined with the community's everyday livelihood practices (Chatkaewnapanon & Lee, 2022). Situating the current study within the CBT literature reinforces the argument that community involvement in tourism planning cannot be assumed to increase linearly with motivation or empowerment alone but is also shaped by the extent to which formal planning structures accommodate community-driven, bottom-up governance mechanisms.

Hypotheses Development

Natural attractions encompass key environmental elements that contribute to the distinctiveness of a destination. These include scenic landscapes, the presence of wildlife in their natural habitats, and prominent geographical features such as rivers, forests, and mountains (Connell et al., 2015). Beyond attracting tourists, these natural features are pivotal in fostering ecotourism engagement within local communities by encouraging participation

in tourism-related activities, conservation efforts, and sustainable economic initiatives. Local residents in tourist destinations constitute a key stakeholder group due to their deep-rooted connections to these locations (Ribeiro et al., 2017). Living in or near these destinations, their daily activities and recreational behaviours directly influence the surrounding natural environment.

As an integral part of the tourism landscape, residents' perspectives and actions can significantly impact the reputation and long-term sustainability of the destination (Wang et al., 2019). When local communities recognise the value of their natural surroundings, they may be more inclined to engage in ecotourism, actively participate in conservation efforts, and support responsible tourism practices that enhance both the visitor experience and the ecological health of their environment. This is an illustrative of motivation, which is crucial in ecotourism since it drives human actions, pushing them to behave in specific ways (Line & Costen, 2017). Furthermore, the real essence of tourism development is embedded in the intangible values derived from a deep connection to place and personal enrichment (Strzelecka et al., 2017). Based on this notion, the following hypotheses are suggested:

> H_1: The community's perceived attractiveness of the natural environment positively influences their ecotourism motivation.

Ecotourism thrives when it is based on an inclusive process where communities actively engage in decision-making, formulation, and execution of tourism initiatives (Wang et al., 2015). When communities are involved at every stage of ecotourism development, whether in policy monitoring, daily tourism operations, or environmental education, they build trust and enhance the outcomes of these initiatives (Sobhani et al., 2022). This highlights how communities become invested in preserving their environment when they recognise tangible benefits and are seen as essential contributors to ecotourism. Community-led ecotourism fosters informed decision-making, effective impact management, and the creation of local businesses, all while enhancing vital services like infrastructure, education, and healthcare (Butcher, 2005). Therefore, when the motivations behind ecotourism align alongside the necessities and aspirations of local communities, it paves the way for impactful participation in tourism planning, driving sustainability and empowering individuals to shape their futures. Nonetheless, as discussed above, this positive translation of motivation into involvement is contingent on the accessibility of participatory governance structures. Where bureaucratic barriers constrain the community's channels for input, motivated residents may instead disengage from formal planning processes (Bichler, 2021; Osman et al., 2018). Accordingly, it is assumed that:

> H_2: Ecotourism motivation influences community involvement in tourism planning.

Political empowerment occurs when a community is actively engaged in tourism and affects the decision-making processes in their region (Wiyono et al., 2023). This empowerment enhances residents' motivation by giving them complete authority over decisions and discussions, fostering genuine participation (Shen et al., 2022). Besides, when people are motivated from within, their behaviours tend to be more consistent and sustained, leading to improved outcomes (Bin Saeed, 2019). This reflects how tourism can give residents a sense of political influence, promoting greater political involvement in decision-making, irrespective of the community's inclination, and perception of tourism within their vicinity (Joo et al., 2020). Thus, political empowerment may act as a significant moderating factor that strengthens the connection between ecotourism motivation and community participation, ultimately leading to more inclusive and sustainable tourism planning.

Similar dynamics can be observed for psychological and social empowerment. Psychologically, tourism increases awareness among visitors about the value and appeal of natural areas near the communities they visit. This acknowledgement contributes to heightened pride and self-esteem among local residents. Deemed as one of tourism's most significant non-economic benefits, both pride and self-esteem are posited to contribute to the residents' well-being (Strzelecka et al., 2017). Recognising such benefits, many communities are drawn to ecotourism because of its potential to enhance their quality of life (Rachamawati & Fountain, 2020). With this motivation, residents play a crucial function in determining tourism development within their communities, creating an opportunity to maximise the benefits while minimising any negative effects (Gannon et al., 2021). As community members actively participate in decision-making processes, engage in knowledge sharing, and commit to collective goals, they enhance overall satisfaction and promote sustainable tourism practices (Jusoh & Ahmad, 2018).

However, the level of involvement often hinges on residents' sense of social empowerment. When residents feel empowered, they can collaborate effectively, strengthening community ties and boosting engagement in tourism initiatives (Boley et al., 2014). Moreover, it helps forge social bonds and fosters cross-cultural understanding, which further deepens community engagement (Lv et al., 2021). A vital component of this dynamic is social trust, which encourages individuals to cooperate and get involved in collective efforts (Chang & Chuang, 2011). When residents feel connected to key stakeholders, they are more inclined to play a dynamic role in the decision-making and planning processes (Azwar et al., 2023). Yet, drawing on the participatory governance and CBT perspectives discussed earlier, it is equally plausible that strongly empowered communities with robust internal social networks come to rely on their own informal, cooperative decision-making channels, viewing bureaucratic,

formally structured planning avenues as redundant or unresponsive to their needs (Bichler, 2021; Gutierrez, 2023). Drawing from the overall discussion, the subsequent hypotheses are introduced:

H_3: Political empowerment moderates the relationship between ecotourism motivation and community involvement in tourism planning.

H_4: Psychological empowerment moderates the relationship between ecotourism motivation and community involvement in tourism planning.

H_5: Social empowerment moderates the relationship between ecotourism motivation and community involvement in tourism planning.

When residents actively use their resources, they unlock access to job opportunities and establish their tourism-related enterprises (Kia, 2021). As communities begin to recognise the myriad benefits of sustainability, they are more inclined to champion and propel tourism initiatives forward. Evidence shows that when locals participate in tourism planning and management, it cultivates a positive outlook toward tourism, strengthening community support for its development (Azwar et al., 2023). Furthermore, with the inclusion of cultural practices, community values, and traditional knowledge, a tourism model is emerging that is environmentally sustainable, culturally educational, and economically feasible (Emelie, 2024). Integrating this local wisdom with sustainable tourism strategies ensures that development resonates alongside the community's values and heritage, setting the premise for long-term sustainability. Building upon the discussion, the subsequent hypotheses are proposed:

H_6: Community involvement in tourism planning influences community support for sustainable ecotourism development.

Figure 1 illustrates the research model and the hypothesised causal effect between the study constructs. The EMT and empowerment theory underpins the study framework.

METHODS

This study conducted a quantitative, cross-sectional design to investigate the relationship between natural attraction, ecotourism motivations, and tripartite dimensions of empowerment—political, psychological, and social—as well as community involvement in tourism planning and their support for sustainable tourism development. The research focuses on the local community, with the Setiu Wetland in Terengganu, Malaysia, serving as the research setting. The Setiu Wetland, the biggest natural wetland on the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia, encompass diverse ecosystems, including freshwater, seawater, brackish water, and a 14 km lagoon (Terengganu State Parks Management Council, 2025). Due to its size and ecological diversity, the wetland requires

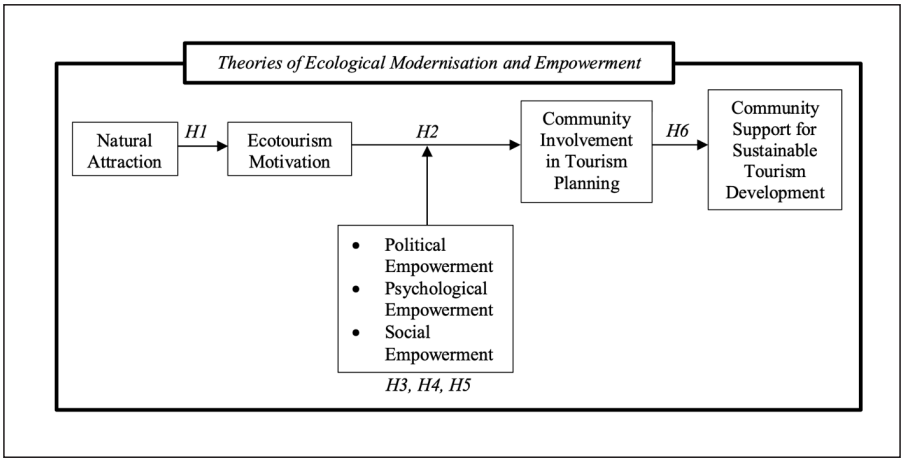


Figure 1. Research model
Source: Authors' own work

careful investment of time, resources, and management to achieve sustainable ecotourism development.

The strong integration of ecotourism with local livelihoods, particularly through fishing, aquaculture, handicrafts, and community-led tourism initiatives, provides a valuable context for exploring these relationships. Additionally, a report from the Terengganu State Department of Urban and Regional Planning outlines a comprehensive development framework that extends to the year 2035, emphasising a balance between conservation efforts and sustainable tourism growth. This makes the Setiu Wetland a suitable case study for understanding how community engagement influences support for sustainable ecotourism development (see PlanMalaysia@Terengganu, 2022).

According to the report, the 15 villages identified as key components for developing Setiu Wetlands are located across three sub-districts: Pantai, Chalok 2, and Hulu Setiu (Table 1).

The total population of these villages is 12,025 people, and the required sample size was decided using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table, leading to a sample of 375 respondents. To enhance representativeness across all villages, an additional 10 percent was added to the initial sample size, bringing the sample size to 416. The questionnaires include three screening test questions and the respondents' demographic profiling to validate the respondents' inclusion criteria. The details of the sections in the questionnaire are illustrated in Table 2.

Five-point Likert scales ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree) were employed for measurement. Two tourism scholars established face validity, and a pilot study was undertaken with 20 local communities to gauge its reliability. The face validity assessment resulted in minor item modifications to ensure clarity. Next, the pilot assessment produced Cronbach's Alpha values over the required cut-off of 0.70 for all research constructs.

Table 1
Sample size detail

No.	Village	Total Population (A)	Sample Size According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970) *	Additional 10% Sample Size	Final Usable Sample Size Collected
		Pantai Sub-District			
1.	Fikri	861	27	30	31
2.	Padang Saujana	615	19	21	14
3.	Gong Batu	500	16	18	17
4.	Kuala Setiu (Pengkalan Gelap)	200	6	7	22
5.	Saujana	3680	115	128	25
6.	Mangkok	650	20	22	28
		Chalok 2 Sub-District			
7.	Bari Kecil	520	16	18	18
8.	Bari Besar	730	23	25	29
9.	Rhu Sepuluh	702	22	24	30
10.	Penarik Baru	330	10	12	35
11.	Penarik	520	16	18	30
12.	Pandan Jaya	769	24	26	34
13.	Beris Tok Ku	580	18	20	21
14.	Telaga Papan	948	30	33	47
		Hulu Setiu Sub-District			
15.	Padang	420	13	14	23
Total		12,025 (B)	375 (C)	416	404

Note. *To calculate the sample size according to Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) recommendation, the following formula is used: A/B x C.
Source: Authors' own work

Table 2
Questionnaire items

Constructs	No. of Items	Source
Natural Attraction (NA)	3	Ali et al. (2020)
Ecotourism Motivation (EM)	3	Ali et al. (2020)
Political Empowerment (POLEMP)	3	Aleshinloye et al. (2021)
Psychological Empowerment (PSYEMP)	5	
Social Empowerment (SOCEMP)	3	
Community Involvement in Tourism Planning (CI)	3	Aleshinloye et al. (2021)
Community Support for Sustainable Tourism Development (CSUPP)	5	Eslami et al. (2019)

Source: Authors' own work

The questionnaire was administered in person in Setiu Wetland over a three-month period from October to December 2023. The study conducted a multistage non-probability sampling method centred on the systematic allocation of the respondents based on proportional representation from each village. This is followed by filtering the valid participants who had relevant knowledge about ecotourism and the development planning for tourism in Setiu Wetland (see Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). This approach was essential for ensuring data quality and validity.

Then, the collected data was cleaned, coded, and analysed using SPSS version 24 software. A total of 404 valid responses were recorded, with 47.5% being men and 52.5% women, with the majority being self-employed (44.6%). Most respondents were between 35 and 49 years old (26.2%), were high school leavers (39.9%) and generated an income of less than RM1,000 (53.7%). This income distribution reflects the broader socio-economic profile of the Setiu Wetland villages, where fishing, small-scale aquaculture, and informal or seasonal tourism-related work remain in the primary livelihoods. The predominance of self-employed, lower-income respondents is therefore consistent with the study's target population and should be taken into account when interpreting the generalisability of the findings to other, more urbanised or economically diversified ecotourism destinations. To remove common method bias (CMB), this study adheres to Podsakoff et al.'s (2003) suggestion, where Harman's single-factor test is employed. Accordingly, the results indicated that the primary factor did not account for a dominant portion of the variance, suggesting that CMB is unlikely to significantly affect the study's results.

Then, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was implemented to test the study hypotheses in two stages. The first stage involved evaluating the measurement model to ensure the reliability and validity of the measures used. In the second stage, the structural relationships among the latent constructs were analysed. PLS-SEM was selected for this study due to its attributes, which enable it to verify theoretical and causal models, predict relevance, and align with current trends among researchers in the tourism field (Sarstedt et al., 2020). Additionally, the proposed conceptual framework is complex, integrating political, psychological, and social empowerment as tripartite mediators. Thus, PLS-SEM is an appropriate technique for addressing such complex models (Hanafiah, 2020). Moreover, the research data did not meet normality assumptions, making PLS-SEM a proper choice for studies with non-normal distributions (Hair Jr. et al., 2017). For the data analysis, SmartPLS version 4 software was utilised.

RESULTS

PLS-SEM Measurement Model

The measurement model results are presented in Table 3. Factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), Cronbach's alpha,

Table 3
Measurement model assessment

Constructs	Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Natural Attraction (NA)		0.812	0.914	0.711
NA1	0.783			
NA2	0.887			
NA3	0.855			
Ecotourism Motivation (EM)		0.814	0.836	0.730
EM1	0.786			
EM2	0.909			
EM3	0.864			
Political Empowerment (POLEMP)		0.881	0.891	0.809
POLEMP1	0.853			
POLEMP2	0.948			
POLEMP3	0.896			
Psychological Empowerment (PSYEMP)		0.886	0.928	0.665
PSYEMP1	0.885			
PSYEMP2	0.871			
PSYEMP3	0.870			
PSYEMP4	0.678			
PSYEMP5	0.751			
Social Empowerment (SOCEMP)		0.860	0.894	0.779
SOCEMP1	0.832			
SOCEMP2	0.913			
SOCEMP3	0.900			
Community Involvement in Tourism Planning (CI)		0.812	0.816	0.727
CI1	0.872			
CI2	0.875			
CI3	0.810			
Community Support for Sustainable Tourism Development (CSUPP)		0.881	0.909	0.666
CSUPP1	0.782			
CSUPP2	0.759			
CSUPP3	0.834			
CSUPP4	0.818			
CSUPP5	0.881			

Note. See Appendix 1 for the details on each item
NA = Natural Attraction, EM = Ecotourism Motivation, POLEMP = Political Empowerment, PSYEMP = Psychological Empowerment, SOCEMP = Social Empowerment, CI = Community Involvement in Tourism Planning, CSUPP = Community Support for Sustainable Tourism Development
Source: Authors' own work

and average variance extracted (AVE) are employed to evaluate the reliability of the research constructs. A reliable scale is indicated by factor loadings greater than 0.70, along with CR and Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.70. Nevertheless, a loading score between 0.40 and 0.70 is acceptable if the CR and AVE meet the required thresholds (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019). Regarding convergent validity, the AVEs surpass the minimum 0.50 (Hanafiah et al., 2021).

Next, the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) correlation ratio was utilised to test the discriminant's validity. All the HTMT values were below 0.90, thus verifying the scales' discriminant validity as per Ringle et al. (2015) (Table 4).

PLS-SEM Structural Model

In the second step, the structural model assessment was executed. The path analysis (Table 5) between natural attraction and ecotourism motivation (H_1) ($\beta = 0.417^{***}$) has a significant positive relationship. This is contrary to the dynamics between the latter construct and community involvement in tourism planning, where the pattern of the significant influence is negative (H_2) ($\beta = -0.100^{*}$). In terms of the moderating effect of political (H_3) ($\beta = 0.077$), psychological (H_4) ($\beta = 0.055$) and social empowerment (H_5) ($\beta = -0.149^{***}$), only the latter construct has a significant negative impact on the relationship between ecotourism motivation and community involvement in tourism planning. Lastly, community involvement in tourism planning (H_6) ($\beta = 0.233^{***}$) has a statistically significant influence on their support for sustainable tourism destination development. Overall, the results show that H_1, H_2, H_5, and H_6 are supported.

Regarding model fitness (Table 5), it can be established that natural attraction can statistically significantly explain the 17.4% (R^2= 0.174) variance of ecotourism motivation. Subsequently, ecotourism motivation and the tripartite dimensions of empowement (political, psychological and social) can statistically significantly explain the 49.8% (R^2= 0.498) variance of community involvement in tourism planning. As for the community support for sustainable tourism development, only 5% (R^2= 0.05) of its variance can be attributed to the constructs in the research model. Moving on to the effect size, the structural model reveals a medium effect size for natural attraction and ecotourism motivation (f^2=0.211). The other relationships, which comprise ecotourism motivation (f^2=0.013) along with its interaction effect on the political (f^2=0.008), psychological (f^2=0.004) and social empowerment (f^2=0.024) toward community involvement with tourism planning, are recorded to have a small effect size. This is also the case for the effect of size of community involvement in tourism planning (f^2=0.053) on their support for sustainable tourism development.

As for the model's predictive relevance, the Q^2 values are above zero for all frameworks comprising the interrelationship between natural attraction, ecotourism

Table 4
Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT)

	CI	CSUPP	EM	NA	POLEMP	PSYEMP	SOCEMP
CI							
CSUPP	0..806						
EM	0.801	0.815					
NA	0.493	0.574	0.772				
POLEMP	0.680	0.714	0.758	0.692			
PSYEMP	0.642	0.617	0.625	0.560	0.633		
SOCEMP	0.522	0.582	0.683	0.746	0.761	0.584	

CI = Community Involvement in Tourism Planning, CSUPP = Community Support for Sustainable Tourism Development, EM = Ecotourism Motivation, NA = Natural Attraction, POLEMP = Political Empowerment, PSYEMP = Psychological Empowerment, SOCEMP = Social Empowerment
Source: Authors' own work

Table 5
Structural estimates (path analysis)

	Beta (β)	T-Statistics	P-Values	f^2	R^2	Q^2
H_1: NA -> EM	0.417***	7.029	0.000	0.211	0.174	0.447
H_2: EM -> CI	-0.100*	2.101	0.036	0.013	0.498	0.441
H_3: EM *x* POLEMP -> CI	0.077	1.828	0.068	0.008		
H_4: EM *x* PSYEMP -> CI	0.055	1.460	0.144	0.004		
H_5: EM *x* SOCEMP -> CI	-0.149***	3.632	0.000	0.024		
H_6: CI -> CSUPP	0.233***	6.136	0.000	0.053	0.050	0.497

Note. *** p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05
NA = Natural Attraction, EM = Ecotourism Motivation, POLEMP = Political Empowerment, PSYEMP = Psychological Empowerment, SOCEMP = Social Empowerment, CI = Community Involvement in Tourism Planning, CSUPP = Community Support for Sustainable Tourism Development
Source: Authors' own work

motivation, and tripartite dimensions of empowerment (political, psychological, and social), as well as community involvement in tourism planning and their support for sustainable tourism development. Given the predictive relevance outputs, it can be concluded that all frameworks tested in the study can be recognised as substantial predictive models, per Henseler et al. (2012).

To further clarify the direction and strength of the significant negative moderating effect of social empowerment (H_5), a simple slope plot was generated directly in SmartPLS 4 using the two-stage moderation approach, following the conventional low (-1 SD), mean, and high (+1 SD) moderator-level approach (Figure 2). As illustrated, when social empowerment is low, the relationship

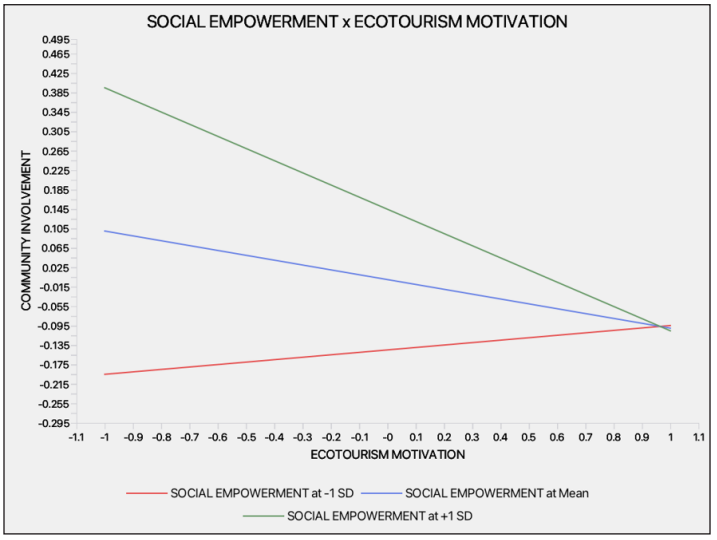


Figure 2. Simple slope plot for the moderating effect of social empowerment on the ecotourism motivation-community involvement relationship
Source: Authors' own work

between ecotourism motivation and community involvement in tourism planning is close to flat and marginally positive. At the mean level of social empowerment, the relationship mirrors the overall negative main effect reported for H_2. However, when social empowerment is high, the same relationship becomes markedly negative, indicating that the negative effect of ecotourism motivation on formal community involvement is amplified precisely among residents with the strongest sense of social empowerment. It is worth noting that, consistent with SmartPLS's two-stage moderation procedure, the model also estimates a direct effect of social empowerment on community involvement in tourism planning independent of ecotourism motivation. This direct effect is positive and is responsible for the three simple-slope lines converging near the upper end of the ecotourism motivation range rather than at its mean, as would be the case if no such direct effect were present.

DISCUSSION

This study has explored and verified the influence of natural attraction on ecotourism motivation. To a certain degree, this study's findings are in line with the work of Alananzeh et al. (2022), who found that destination attributes significantly affect community motivation to participate in tourism events. Although their study focused on event tourism, the shared emphasis on destination qualities as a motivational factor supports the notion that environmental and surrounding characteristics can shape tourism-related behavioural intentions across contexts. Besides, this finding also solidifies the confirmed dynamics, as reported by

Ali et al. (2020), between the natural attraction and ecotourism motivation in an ecotourism and wetland-based research setting. On the other hand, this study also confirmed the nexus between ecotourism motivation and community involvement in tourism planning, which is differently influenced by the moderating role of distinctive dimensions of political, psychological, and social empowerment. It is crucial to note that political and psychological empowerment do not significantly moderate the relationship between ecotourism motivation and community involvement in tourism planning. However, social empowerment has been found to moderate the relationship significantly but negatively. Likewise, a significant negative relationship has also been found between ecotourism motivation and community involvement in tourism planning.

This unexpected dynamic reflects the complexity of ecotourism motivation, which does not necessarily translate into increased involvement among the community in tourism planning. Perhaps this can be ascribed to the bureaucratic facets of tourism planning, which may lead to frustration or disengagement, especially among the motivated community that expects immediate economic benefit. Moreover, this may indicate a perceived lack of influence among motivated community members in the decision-making processes. This perception could help explain why some community members prioritise personal business opportunities, such as running homestays or ecotours, over collective participation in planning efforts. Such a situation may contribute to the worsening effect of social empowerment on the reduced need for formal involvement in tourism planning. It is posited that a stronger social cohesion or sense of agency within the community may lead them to perceive formal tourism planning as unnecessary, thus explaining their lower participation (see Azinuddin et al., 2020; Azwar et al., 2023). This situation might discourage broader participation, creating a social division that makes communities more aware of tourism governance inequalities and withdraw from collective and formal planning.

As for the findings on the non-significant moderating role of political and psychological empowerment, they align with the mixed results found in existing studies, which indicate that distinctive dimensions of empowerment can have discernible effects on support-based dependent constructs. While the existing studies do not operationalise empowerment as a moderator, it helps the current study to situate the findings within the broader context of tourism research. For instance, dos Santos et al. (2024) reported that psychological empowerment significantly influences support for sustainable tourism development. In contrast, Yeager et al. (2020) reported that both psychological and social empowerment significantly affect support for short-term vacation rentals. This differs from the findings of Aleshinloye et al. (2021), who found that only psychological empowerment does not significantly impact involvement in tourism planning. These

varying outcomes may be attributed to the distinct contexts of each study, which can lead to different significant effects of empowerment within a specific destination (Scheyvens & Watt, 2021).

Accordingly, the current study's findings perhaps illustrate a lack of real political influence, which can be attributed to the dominance of external stakeholders in the tourism sector. This dominance is posited to render the role of political and psychological empowerment ineffective since it demonstrates the highly institutional planning process, subsequently reducing one's self-efficacy or confidence to influence. Despite the negative dynamics, this study also confirms the positive and significant influence of community involvement in tourism planning on their support for sustainable tourism development. The findings resonate with the findings of past studies as numerous scholars assert that when local communities are active and committed to tourism planning, decision-making, and operations, they will have growing possibilities to support tourism initiatives (Gannon et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

Theoretical Contributions

This study is considered novel, given the scarcity of studies employing the EMT in tourism and wetland-based destinations. The integration of the empowerment theory into the conceptual model of this study further narrows the theoretical gap identified in terms of its pertinence in the realm of the nature-based destination and its dynamics within the interrelationship between the study constructs. Accordingly, the study explores how natural attraction, especially derived from the context of wetland-based destinations, can shape the community's ecotourism motivation, which ultimately leads to their involvement in tourism planning. However, the negative influence of ecotourism motivation on community involvement in tourism planning highlights the complex dynamics of cognitive and behavioural scholarships in the community-based tourism development literature. This reflects the importance of findings and offers a valuable and novel contribution to the tourism body of knowledge. Next, our study adds to the body of knowledge regarding the EMT and empowerment theory by demonstrating how various community empowerment dimensions might have distinct moderating effects on the nexus between ecotourism motivation and community involvement in tourism planning.

However, the study findings contrast with the central tenet of EMT, which establishes that the community will engage in sustainable practices with increased environmental awareness and economic opportunities (see Ali et al., 2020). The empirical evidence generated from this study reflects the double-edged sword nature of ecotourism motivation and social empowerment, particularly highlighting complexities that challenge the EMT's assumptions. Therefore, the paradox

of ecotourism motivation and social empowerment presents a new perspective not fully accounted for in EMT as it contradicts the theory's assumption that modernisation processes naturally foster their involvement in inclusivity (Ali et al., 2020). On the other hand, the negative influence of social empowerment on the dynamics between ecotourism motivation and community involvement in tourism planning contrasts with the conventional empowerment theory. Based upon the premise that greater empowerment leads to higher participation, this study expands the utilisation of the empowerment theory in tourism, as it can be posited that strong social networks and cohesion within the community may lead to their disengagement in formal tourism governance (see Azinuddin et al., 2023; dos Santos et al., 2024).

In fact, the absence of significant moderating impacts of political and psychological empowerment in this study highlights the different theoretical facets and depths that can possibly further enhance the universality of empowerment effects in tourism participation. This is a valuable contribution to the empowerment theory, as past studies supported the ambivalent empirical evidence that highlights the complexity of the dynamics between empowerment and participation of the community (Gutierrez, 2023). As discussed previously, the highly institutionalised tourism planning contexts may lead to structural barriers that do not necessarily lead to actual influence on community participation. The nature of the results is inferred to add to the expansion of the empowerment theory, where the study highlights the need to integrate the limitations of community with strong social agency in structured planning environments.

IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

The nature of the findings reflects the non-linear dynamics generated from the interrelationship between the study constructs. For instance, the negative relationship between ecotourism motivation and community involvement in tourism planning heightens the need for policymakers to restructure tourism planning procedures to ensure they are more inclusive, transparent and responsive to community needs. Perhaps a local tourism advisory committee need to be empowered to further enhance the community-driven decision-making processes and subsequently capitalise on the existing social networks to integrate informal decision-making structures with formal tourism planning.

With the negative moderation effect of social empowerment on the link between ecotourism motivation and community involvement in tourism planning, traditional leadership structures should be recognised and maintained. Tourism policies, therefore, should incorporate community forums and cooperative-based decision-making, which can be employed in parallel with government planning agencies to ensure that socially empowered groups can contribute meaningfully to sustainable ecotourism development. On the other hand, short-term economic incentives such as small grants,

revenue-sharing agreements or microfinance options are a few strategic directions that can be undertaken considering the findings that may suggest the expectation of immediate economic benefits among the motivated community members.

Furthermore, the negative influence of ecotourism motivation on community involvement can also be attributed to the scarcity of understanding or awareness of how to engage in formal tourism planning. In this sense, capacity-building programs that encompass crucial elements, namely strategic planning, tourism product development, financial literacy, and conservation management, should be emphasised. This can be done in collaboration with universities and non-governmental organisations related to tourism. Implementing such programs also needs to prioritise community-driven sustainability initiatives to cultivate long-term support from the locals. For example, designating locals as stewards of nature-based destinations in the shape of eco-rangers, nature guides, or biodiversity monitors can ensure that they remain part of the main fabric of the sustainable tourism governance model.

More specifically, given the negative effect of ecotourism motivation and the negative moderating role of social empowerment on formal planning involvement, destination managers such as the Terengganu State Parks Management Council and the local district office could adopt a two-track governance formula. First, a "fast-track" consultation channel (e.g., a rotating village-level liaison seat on the Setiu Wetland tourism advisory committee, with a fixed maximum response time for community proposals) to directly counter bureaucratic fatigue, and second, formal recognition of existing informal structures, such as village heads, fishermen's associations, and cooperative groups, as official consultative bodies within the planning process, rather than requiring residents to route their input solely through conventional public hearings. Anchoring formal planning cycles to the community's existing informal social networks, instead of running them in parallel, is intended to reduce the incentive for socially empowered residents to bypass formal channels altogether.

LIMITATION AND RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study, like others, has certain limitations that need to be acknowledged when planning future research in this field. The research employed non-probability sampling, which means that the data analysed cannot be applied beyond the tourists involved in this study. As a result, the findings should be interpreted with caution. However, a reliable data model can still instil confidence in the results and interpretations (Field, 2009). Future investigations can further examine and confirm the significant relationships among natural attraction, ecotourism motivation, community empowerment, involvement in tourism planning, and support for tourism development in

various contexts. Future research is also recommended to incorporate different stages of tourism destination development through a longitudinal approach. This would allow for a comprehensive assessment of the dynamics from the early stages of destination development to the maturity phase, where growth begins to plateau.

Additionally, factors such as place attachment, tourism impacts, emotional solidarity, or quality of life could provide deeper insights into the associations between natural attractions, ecotourism motivation, community empowerment, engagement in tourism planning, and support for sustainable tourism development. Building specifically on the current study's counterintuitive findings, future research is encouraged to re-examine the boundary conditions of the motivation-involvement and empowerment-involvement relationships by testing additional mediating or moderating variables such as institutional trust, perceived bureaucratic complexity, and the strength of informal governance networks, which may help explain why political and psychological empowerment were non-significant and why social empowerment ultimately reduced formal planning involvement in this study. These recommendations are made based on the conceptual framework of the suggested constructs, which align with general destination planning and development, as well as community-based behavioural elements. Adopting these approaches can lead to improved policy formulation and implementation by the wider spectrum of relevant actors in the context of ecotourism and nature-based destinations.

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