



IDENTIFYING MOTIVATORS OF ECOTOURISM DESTINATION COMPETITIVENESS: THE EXAMINATION ON SOFT INFRASTRUCTURE CONSTRUCTS AND MODERATING IMPACT OF MOBILE TECHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The development of ecotourism in Malaysia is crucial in the current digitalized world, as nature enthusiasts seek authentic travel experiences to reconnect with the environment. This study focuses on investigating the link between government tourism policy, health services, safety and security, destination competitiveness, and the moderating effect of mobile technology. The study was conducted on 170 domestic tourists who visited various national parks in Sarawak, Malaysia. The data collected has undergone preliminary analyses using SPSS 26.0 while the proposed study model was evaluated using WarpPLS 8.0, which allowed for path modelling and bootstrapping to obtain the estimates of standard error and p-values. The results indicated a significant direct relationship between health services and destination competitiveness. Mobile technology was found to moderate the relationship between government tourism policy, safety and security, and destination competitiveness. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the study was limited to domestic tourists, and the implications of these findings are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Malaysia, Ecotourism, Soft Infrastructure, Mobile Technology, Structural Equation Modeling.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism sector has been one of the sectors with the quickest rate of growth over the past 50 years. Tourism is becoming increasingly dominant in the global economy (Kubickova & Smith, 2019; Nilashi et al., 2019). According to Baggio (2019), tourism encompasses the movement of individuals from their usual surroundings to other places for either personal or professional purposes, involving cultural, social, and economic factors. Tourism has far-reaching effects on the economy, environment, and the well-being of residents and tourists. As a result, it involves several sectors and requires different products and services for travellers. Thus, tourism has an impact on a wide range of stakeholders (Li & Wu, 2019).

The assessment of destination competitiveness is a crucial aspect of the tourism industry in today's globalized world. The remarkable performance of tourism sector, particularly in the global economy has led countries to invest in destination development, resulting in an upsurge in the number of destinations competing for a similar group of tourists (Zehrer et al., 2017). Therefore, destination competitiveness is of significant interest to policymakers and practitioners, given the intense competition in the global tourism market (Drakulić Kovačević et al., 2018). When tourists choose a destination, they consider the whole travel experience, which underlines the importance for a competitive destination to focus not only on its attractions, but also on other elements such as hospitality and transport". According to Catudan (2016), the government's investment in local infrastructure, health services, transportation, peace, order, and other facilities can lure direct foreign investment and stimulate tourism. This indicates that prioritizing these factors can help to improve the competitiveness of a destination. Additionally, previous studies have also emphasized the importance of infrastructure, transportation, and hospitality industries in the tourism industry (Chambers, 2010; Fernández et al., 2020).

Competitiveness of a destination relies on its availability of adequate infrastructure development. A destination needs to be constantly expanded and

enhanced in terms of its infrastructure to stay competitive among other destinations (Mustafa et al., 2020). Travellers typically require a variety of infrastructures when they travel to different places, including health services to address any emergencies or ensure good health, safety and security measures to guarantee personal safety. Moreover, clear tourism policies that facilitate access to the destination. Indeed, both qualitative and quantitative diversification of infrastructure is often regarded as highly influential on a destination's attractiveness (Herman et al., 2020). Infrastructure is typically classified into two categories: hard and soft infrastructure (Baskakova & Malafeev, 2017). However, this study solely takes into account soft infrastructure as a factor affecting the competitiveness of the destination.

Increasingly, the attention of tourists has turned to visiting ecotourism sites on a regular basis to get a quick break from a stressful work environment (Fromm, 2017). As a result, there might be an increase in tourists visiting these natural attractions. However, it is advisable for tourism stakeholders to operate with a fine sense of balance when it comes to competitiveness traits, since doing otherwise could result in over tourism due to a potential overflow of carrying capacity. Undoubtedly, the ecotourism sites need to make sure that their infrastructure is of appropriate quality if they want to maintain their comparative, competitive advantages and market positions among rivals. The infrastructure of Malaysia is inconsistent, especially between the West and the East of Malaysia. According to Tan Sri Datuk Patinggi Abang Johari Tun Openg, the Premier of Sarawak, the East Malaysia state - Sarawak, is lagged behind West Malaysia in terms of infrastructural development for far too long, and this has hampered Sarawak's overall development. (Aga, 2019; "Masing Laments Mistreatment of Sarawak, Lack of Road Infrastructure," 2020).

Moreover, ensuring easy and safe access to various tourism sites within the destination is crucial for tourism development (Thong et al., 2022). Soft infrastructure plays an imperative role in ensuring ease and safety for tourists while travelling. Consequently, soft infrastructure will impact destination competitiveness (Hanafiah et al., 2016; Arshad et al., 2018; Bagheri et al., 2018). However, to date, there is limited study on soft infrastructure impacting destination competitiveness in Sarawak, Malaysia. Lacking empirical evidence on investigating the soft infrastructure is a problem for decision-makers or scholars while making decisions or performing further research. Thus, it is necessary to include soft infrastructure in this study to find out