



REVISITING PERCEIVED DETERMINANTS OF TOURISM DESTINATION COMPETITIVENESS AMONG TOURISTS: THE CASE OF NATIONAL PARKS IN SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

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How to cite (APA style): Thong, J.-Z., Lo, M.C., Ramayah, T., Mohamad, A.A. (2023). Revisiting perceived determinants of tourism destination competitiveness among tourists: The case of national parks in Sarawak, Malaysia. *Turyzm/Tourism*, 33(1), 93–107. <https://doi.org/10.18778/0867-5856.33.1.09>

ABSTRACT

The present study aims to widen the existing literature by discovering potential determining factors at selected ecotourism destinations, primarily involving Bako, Niah, Kubah, Gunung Gading and Gunung Mulu National Parks. A closed questionnaire was answered by 188 respondents. Preliminary analyses were performed and partial least square structural equation modeling was employed as the analytical measure, thus discovering the significant role of destination resource constructs in the enhancement of ecotourism competitiveness in Sarawak, Malaysia. The statistical findings of the current work revealed that endowed resources (natural resources and cultural heritage attractions), created resources (range of activities) as well as supporting resources (destination accessibility and quality of tourism services) lead to enhanced tourism destination competitiveness. The research adds to the growing body of knowledge examining the perspectives of tourists towards the determining factors of destination competitiveness, while providing meaningful insights for industry actors, thus enabling effective planning of management and development. The present work offers empirical evidence that gives information for industry stakeholders, including business operators, policy makers and tourism planners in order for natural tourism destinations to prosper.

KEYWORDS

endowed resources, created resources, supporting resources, destination competitiveness, structural equation modeling

ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

Received:
1 November 2022
Accepted:
14 April 2023
Published:
19 June 2023

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism, a multifarious phenomenon, is a broad term that encompasses a staggering array of entities, sectors or subjects, activities, behaviors, and the movement of people between locations or countries (Baggio, 2019). In other words, tourism functions as a mechanism that

boosts a destination's domestic economy (Carmignani, Moyle, 2019). Tourism is one of the service sectors, and is often faced with a tremendous amount of competition within the industry (Jashi, 2013). According to data from the World Tourism Organization (2019), a total of 1.4 billion tourists arrived at foreign destinations in 2018, two years ahead of its long-term estimate from 2010.

The tourism industry has experienced remarkable expansion over the years, and travelers are increasingly looking for fresh trips for leisure, such as natural tourist locations (Lin, Yeh, 2013) and to 'disconnect to reconnect' with Mother Nature (Fromm, 2017).

Ecotourism has been effective in attracting the attention of important parties, including both governments and non-governmental organizations, as well as industry participants, due to the significant role it plays in boosting economic activity and enhancing local society (Bakar et al., 2016; Zoto, Qirici, Polena, 2013). The number of tour operators and agents that participate as providers for ecotourism travel has increased dramatically over time in the respective sectors (Tourism Malaysia, 2018). Indeed, tourists are increasingly visiting natural areas for vacations because of the interesting local natural, cultural and historical treasures (Huh, Uysal, 2004). Consequently, a new market niche for the tourism sector has been developed as a result of shifting visitor travel preferences. Additionally, travelers are sometimes drawn to these locations because of their distinctive natural surroundings, sometimes even magnificent landscapes (Wilson et al., 2001), as well as the mood created by their distinct ethnicities.

However, the growing rivalry within the industry increasingly leads to concerns, specifically in the assurance of effective tourism development (Hanafiah, Hemdi, Ahmad, 2014; Triyanto, Iwu, Musikavanhu, 2018). Natural locations are surrounded by lush vegetation and a wealth of resources. In fact, previous research has shown that tourists are drawn to natural places because of their unique cultures, stunning landscapes and natural surroundings, as well as the sense of community (Erokhin, Hejiman, Ivolga, 2014; Trukhachev, 2015). While having more to offer than metropolitan attractions like well-known cities, these places are less desirable to tourists (Amoah, Radder, Eyk, 2018; Lo et al., 2013). Thus, the current emerging trend of nature-based tourism leads to the necessity of effective management and development plans to eliminate risks of over-tourism (Centre for Responsible Travel [CREST], 2018), in conjunction with the effort to stay competitive within the industry.

Thus, the present study involved the investigation of endowed resource elements, natural resources and cultural heritage attractions; created resources comprising tourism infrastructure and the range of activities; along with supporting resources such as accessibility and the quality of tourism services, particularly in the five studied national parks of Sarawak. While scholars have found that significant drivers of tourism location competitiveness include travelers' attitudes (Barsky, Nash, 2002; Carneiro, Lima, Silva, 2015), the current study aims to explore

how a destination's competitiveness development is influenced by these resources, according to domestic tourists' perceptions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND DEVELOPMENT OF HYPOTHESES

2.1. COMPETITIVENESS THEORY

Comparative resource and competitive advantage notions are frequently employed in competitiveness theory to emphasize the theoretical underpinnings of destination competitiveness models (Mihalic, 2000; Ritchie, Crouch, 2003; Wilde, Cox, 2008). Additionally, according to Crouch and Ritchie (1999), comparative resources are the primary draws (such as the natural environment and cultural resources) for a particular tourist destination, whereas competitive advantage refers to the more sophisticated components that include created resources, which comprise tourism facilities and infrastructure for a destination's competitiveness. Subsequently, scholars such as Navickas and Malakauskaite (2009) and Poon (1993), have highlighted the importance of using comparative resource and competitive advantage notions when examining the competitiveness of a tourist location.

Recent studies have examined the theory of competitiveness to clarify how both endowment (comparative advantage) and created (competitive advantage) contribute to destination competitiveness development (Oye, Okafor, Kinjir, 2013; Yozcu, 2017; Zehrer, Smeral, Hallmann, 2017). In light of the effects of endowed resources, created resources and supporting resources, competitiveness theory serves as the foundation for this study's explanation of how to develop the competitiveness of a destination. These resources are anticipated because it is thought that they will have a significant impact on the competitiveness of tourism destinations.

2.2. TOURISM DESTINATION COMPETITIVENESS

Strong studies and emphasis on the destination competitiveness (DC) idea have been made in tourism literature (Angelkova et al., 2012; Natalia et al., 2019). Numerous studies have discussed the need for a tourist location to become more competitive in order to achieve sustainability in the tourism sector (Lee, King, 2006; Muresan et al., 2019). Given the current status of the tourist market, strong data demonstrate the necessity for the identification of a tourism destination's distinctive selling propositions, which help to sustain a destination's competitiveness (Rahmiati, Othman,