



Tourists' Perceived Destination Competitiveness in Protected Areas: The Case of Semenggoh Nature Reserve

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Abstract

Ecotourism is referred to sustainable tourism, whereby responsible travel is endorsed, especially in natural areas that emphasize on relaxation. In Malaysia, the richness of natural areas leads ecotourism to become one of the rapidly growing industries within the nation. Thus, there is a need for complete understanding of ecotourism practice in planning, developing, and resources management to ensure sustainability without causing environmental degradation. Over the decades, people are progressively pursuing for reconnection with the nature for pukka natural experiences during their travel. This study intends to identify the impacts of natural resources, accessibility, cultural uniqueness, carrying capacity, and perceived values on tourism destination competitiveness from tourists' perspectives. A total of 157 respondents had participated in completing the questionnaire. WarpPLS (version 6.0) was applied to assess the developed model based on path modelling followed by bootstrapping. The results revealed that accessibility and cultural uniqueness are positively and significantly correlated to tourism destination competitiveness based on tourists' perspectives. Surprisingly, natural resources, carrying capacity, and perceived values were observed to be no significant relationship with tourism destination competitiveness. The implications, limitations, and directions for future research are further discussed.

Keywords: Natural resources; Accessibility; Cultural uniqueness; Carrying capacity; Perceived values; Destination competitiveness.



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1. Introduction

Tourism, as [Baggio \(2019\)](#) suggested, it is a composite occurrence where movement of people across nations or places is involved alongside remarkable number of sectors, subjects, happenings, entities, and behaviours. Nevertheless, one recent study has revealed the increasing number of individuals who seek travel opportunities for authentic natural and cultural experiences ([Forbes, 2017](#)). Based on this fact, the attention of policy makers, such as destination marketing organizations (DMO's) and researchers is captured towards sustainable tourism development ([Hall, 2019](#)). Studies in the past have postulated several paybacks through sustaining ecotourism development, which comprises poverty alleviation as well as enhancement in the opportunity of business. In conjunction with that, the focus of Malaysia has been drawn towards development of ecotourism whereby its campaign of Visit 2020 targeted 30 million of international visitors in total with receipt of RM100 billion ([Bernama, 2019](#)).

As revealed by Ministry of Tourism, Arts, Culture, Youth and Sports (MTACYS) in 2018, National Parks in Sarawak, Malaysia has encountered a rise in terms of visitor arrivals with an inclination rate of 14.66% among international tourists. Consequently, there is a possibility of occurrence in relevance to overtourism issues which is increasingly critical to the management of tourism. As proposed by Center for Responsible Travel (2018), tourism management plan which is inactive contributes to the overtourism, which is overcrowding of a destination, specifically national parks. As a result, the fall in tourists' arrivals at national parks due to the reduction in quality of a visitor's experience, eventually leads to decrement in revenues of the national parks. Furthermore, degradation of the environment including pollution in the air, noise and water at the nature reserve due to ineffective tourism management ([Anup, 2016](#); [Eagles, 2002](#); [Nianyong and Zhuge, 2001](#)).

The present study was conducted at Semenggoh Nature Reserve, situated in Sarawak, Malaysia. Among numerous national parks and nature reserves in the state of Sarawak, Semenggoh Nature Reserve sustained substantial number of visits ranging from domestic or international, specifically nature lovers with a growth rate as

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high as 14.19% in 2018 as compared its previous year (Ministry of Tourism *et al.*, 2018). The uniqueness of the nature reserve is well-recognized where it is preserved as the habitat for orangutans, one of the precious endangered species. The natural resources of the national park play a considerable role as tourists' attraction, as well as other built resources contributing to its destination competitiveness (Lo *et al.*, 2017). As such, with high quality of accessibility it ensures tourism destination is accessible for tourists while increasing destination competitiveness (Law and Lo, 2016; Porto and Rucci, 2018; Rucci, 2018). Moreover, it is vital to consider the carrying capacity ensure sustainable tourism development and tourists' perceived value in their visitations to Semenggoh Nature Reserve (Chin *et al.*, 2016). Previous researchers have discovered that tourists' perceptions are a part of substantial determinants of tourism destination competitiveness (Barsky and Nash, 2002; Carneiro *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, the present study aims to examine the perceptions of both domestic and foreign tourists on the impacts of natural resources, accessibility, cultural uniqueness, carrying capacity, and perceived value towards competitiveness development of tourism destination.

Figure-1. Semenggoh Nature Reserve as the Research Site



Source: Authors' own compilation (2019).

Figure-2. View of the Endangered Species, *Orangutan*



Source: Authors' own compilation (2019).

2. Material and Method

This study took place at Semenggoh Nature Reserve in Siburan, Sarawak, Malaysia, one of the renowned nature reserves in Sarawak for its preservation of the unique attractor – the Orangutans (a global endangered species). In this study, a quantitative approach was conducted through questionnaires distribution for data collection. The sample of this study was targeted on both the domestic and international tourists who have visited the nature reserve. The questionnaire consists of two section, where the respondents' demographic information was collected in Section A, whereas the measurement concerning the 6 variables was directed in Section B. Based on past researches (Artuğer, 2015; Canny and Hidayat, 2012; Chi and Qu, 2008; Collins, 2005; Herstanti *et al.*, 2014), there are 24 items in total were adapted to measure the proposed constructs such as natural resources, accessibility, cultural uniqueness, carrying capacity, perceived value, and destination competitiveness. As a result, a total of 160 sets of questionnaires

were collected through convenience sampling method for statistical analyses. Initially, a series of preliminary analyses were performed on the data collected using Statistical Package for Social Science 23.0 (SPSS) where 3 sets of incomplete questionnaires were castoff. Subsequently, the present model of research as shown in [Figure 1](#) was assessed with WarpPLS 6.0 ([Kock, 2017](#)) using the remaining 157 sets of data. Firstly, measurement model comprising valuation on the reliability, convergent and discriminant validity of the measures was used to examine the data in PLS analysis followed by structural model. Then, the hypothesized relationship constructs were tested using bootstrapping.

2.1. Competitiveness Theory

[Mihalic \(2000\)](#), and [Ritchie and Crouch \(2003\)](#) highlighted theoretical basis for model development for destination competitiveness considering both concepts on comparative resource and competitive advantage. Comparative resources are referred to core attractions such as natural environment and resources, whereas competitive advantage is defined as elements which are more progressive consisting created resources such as tourism infrastructure and facilities ([Crouch and Ritchie, 1999](#)). Subsequently, theories of comparative resource and competitive advantage are focused in past studies in examining tourism destination competitiveness ([Crouch and Ritchie, 1999](#); [Mihalic, 2000](#); [Navickas and Malakauskaite, 2009](#)). Likewise, recent studies applied competitiveness theory to investigate sustainable competitiveness of tourism destination to explicate the key competitiveness development from both resources, namely comparative resource and competitive advantage ([Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012](#); [Oye et al., 2013](#); [Yozcu, 2017](#)).

2.2. Tourism Destination Competitiveness

The destination competitiveness concept has undergone development where different definitions were proposed ([Enright and Newton, 2004](#); [Kim, 2012](#); [Ritchie and Crouch, 1993](#)). The competitiveness of a destination, as suggested by [Pearce \(1997\)](#) its aptitude to maintain its market position among the competing destinations by generating and assimilating value addition to its existing tourism-related products for sustainable resources in the long run ([Hassan, 2000](#)). [Crouch and Ritchie \(1999\)](#), suggested a reputable model concerning destination competitiveness for the emphasis of core resources, attractors, and features in relevance to business in determining the competitiveness of a touristic destination ([Lee and King, 2008](#)). Past studies have proven the consequential role of tourism core resources and attractors that lead to competitiveness development of a tourism destination ([Buhalis, 2000](#); [Hassan, 2000](#)). Subsequently, [Dwyer and Kim \(2003\)](#) have postulated the necessity for competitiveness development in a tourism destination to ensure sustainability among tourism destinations ([Lee and King, 2008](#)).

2.3. Natural Resources

Natural resources are referred as the essence of an environment's core resources that comprise of available species on floral and faunal ([Crouch and Ritchie, 1999](#)). Recently, a study has shown that visitation to an area has become a concern due to the tremendous growth in the number of tourists visiting a destination ([Jaini et al., 2019](#)) where violation of human activities can cause damage to countless floral and faunal species ([Sukserm et al., 2012](#)). As indicated by [Dwyer and Kim \(2003\)](#), tourism destinations consist a remarkable range of tourism products which are significant in attracting tourists including facilities and services ([Gunn, 1994](#)) alongside other social-cultural and environmental resources ([Buhalis, 2000](#)). Natural resources play a vital role as one of the tourists' main attractions and competitive advantages of tourism destinations ([Jaafar and Maideen, 2012](#); [Law and Lo, 2016](#); [Ritchie and Crouch, 2000](#)). Thus, it is sensible for the conservation of natural resources by tourism stakeholders without causing unnecessary impacts to the environment ([Lo et al., 2017](#); [MacDonald and Jolliffe, 2003](#); [Scales, 2014](#)) as natural resources dimension is a determinant for tourism destination competitiveness ([Ritchie and Crouch, 1993](#)). Consequently, it is hypothesized that:

H1: *Natural resources is positively related to destination competitiveness.*

2.4. Accessibility

Accessibility of a destination referred to the linkage between market access and choice of destination ([McKercher, 1998](#)). A good quality of destination accessibility enables a destination to offer quality modes of transportation to ease the convey of an individual to a location from the origin ([Aguila and Ragot, 2014](#); [Hall, 2004](#)). Past investigations have highlighted the significance of accessibility in terms of quality as one of the critical determinants of a destination's competitiveness ([Law and Lo, 2016](#); [Mill and Morrison, 1992](#)). When a destination possess accessibility with a decent quality, there is a possibility to increase a destination's capacity in attracting new market, improvements of tourists' travel experience while reassuring sustainability while visitors travel between origins and destinations ([Guiver and Stanford, 2014](#)). Tourists experience optimum level of satisfaction due to the availability of destination information and accommodation location is highly accessible ([McKercher et al., 2003](#)). Furthermore, ([Dwyer and Kim, 2003](#)) emphasized the vital role of accessibility as one of the destinations supporting resources in determining destination competitiveness ([Dwyer et al., 2004](#)). Thus, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2: *Destination accessibility is positively related to destination competitiveness.*

2.5. Cultural Uniqueness

Culture is a mechanism consists of variation in feelings, ideas, creation, and behaviour performed by human in their social lives (Koentjaraningrat, 1992). From the perspective of culture, uniqueness of a tourism destination is recognized as a remarkable element in the process of branding (Ryan, 2005). Moreover, the element of culture encompasses various aspects such as authenticity, variety, originality, and uniqueness as representation of purity or the degree that a product concerning tourism is well-preserved (Damanik and Weber, 2006). Past studies have postulated positive impression by cultural attributes on tourists' satisfaction (Putri, 2017). Subsequently, Liu (2013) and Park (2014) have demonstrated the shift in the tourists' travel patterns towards cultural experiences, especially destinations that offer unique attributes (Dallen, 2006). Cultural uniqueness of a destination offers range of unique heritage has been identified as the fundamental factor in determining tourism destination competitiveness (Dwyer and Kim, 2003; Dwyer *et al.*, 2004; Gupta and Singh, 2019). Therefore, the following hypothesis is developed:

H3: Cultural uniqueness is positively related to destination competitiveness.

2.6. Carrying Capacity

Carrying capacity is the maximum quota to contain visitors at a destination without degrading its physical, socio-cultural environment, and economic while ensuring satisfactory experience among visitors as defined by World Tourism Organization (1994). Correspondingly, degradation of destination resources takes place led by the increasing numbers of tourists, thus, tourists will not be offered with similar natural or cultural experiences as compared to before. Hence, the carrying capacity of a destination, is presumed to impact a destination's competitiveness and its sustainability overtime (Butler, 1997; Liu, 2003). Moreover, tourism destinations encounter reductions in the aspect of sustainability and competitiveness if practices concerning carrying capacity are not managed carefully (Manuel and Miguel, 2008; Swarbrooke, 2003). Carrying capacity has been given serious attention for its role as a key driver for tourism destinations to stay competitive (Dwyer *et al.*, 2001; Mathew, 2009; Mihalic, 2000). Based on the above discussion, the hypothesis is formulated as following:

H4: Carrying capacity is positively related to destination competitiveness.

2.7. Perceived Values

Perceived value was defined as the understanding of consumers' behaviours in a competitive context, considering their feelings and attitudes to comprehend their degree of involvement in the purchase of certain products (Jamal *et al.*, 2011). Collectively, perceived value signifies more than just the price of products, nevertheless, it has been observed as "value for money" (Gallarza and Saura, 2006). Numerous past studies investigated perceived value and its impact on various aspects of tourists' behaviours, such as post-purchase (Moliner *et al.*, 2007; Petrick, 2004), satisfaction and their behavioural intentions (Bajs, 2015; Chin, 2010; Kim, 2012; Lee *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, values such as destination features perceived by tourists contribute to competitive advantage of a tourism destination (Bajs, 2015), eventually, leads to destination competitiveness (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012; Yozcu, 2017). Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H5: Perceived value is positively related to destination competitiveness.

3. Results

3.1. Assessment of the Measurement Model

The reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity of the measures were tested by performing confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) approach. In order to ensure internal consistency, loadings with threshold of 0.5 and above (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1991) were obtained in Table 1. Chen and Chen (2010), suggested that the values of composite reliability (CR) which meet the minimum cut off point of 0.7 for validity declaration. The values for average variance extracted (AVE) should not be lower than the minimum criteria of 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). As a result, the minimum criteria have been met by the values of both CR and AVE respectively. Cronbach's alpha values were also adopted to test the reliability and internal consistency of the instrument (Cronbach, 1951), and the results indicated that the Cronbach's alpha values for natural resources, accessibility, cultural uniqueness, perceived value, destination competitiveness were identified at good level, whereas the value carrying capacity was considered acceptable. As suggested by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) that the value of 0.60 indicating poor, 0.61 – 0.79 for acceptable, and above 0.80 signifying good respectively.

Discriminant validity of the measures is shown in Table 2, referring to criterion by Fornell and Larcker (1981), the AVE value was square rooted and testified against the inter-correlation of the construct with other constructs in the research model and all the values noted as greater than each of the constructs' correlation (Chin, 2010). Hence, the measurement model was acceptable and evidences in terms of reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity are provided. Furthermore, the coefficient of determination (R²) was 0.493 for destination competitiveness, which explained 49.3% of the construct. The (R²) was above the moderate indication as suggested by Cohen (1998) which is slightly above the moderate model of R² 0.33.

Table-1. Result of the Measurement Model

Constructs	Items	Loadings	CR	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE
Natural Resources	SQ_DEST_1	0.826	0.872	0.802	0.631
	SQ_DEST_2	0.849			
	SQ_DEST_3	0.801			
	SQ_DEST_4	0.690			
Accessibility	SQ_ACCE_1	0.860	0.910	0.868	0.716
	SQ_ACCE_2	0.848			
	SQ_ACCE_3	0.825			
	SQ_ACCE_4	0.850			
Cultural Uniqueness	CUL_UOD_1	0.821	0.880	0.819	0.648
	CUL_UOD_2	0.806			
	CUL_UOD_3	0.785			
	CUL_UOD_4	0.807			
Carrying Capacity	CC_2	0.773	0.845	0.724	0.646
	CC_3	0.870			
	CC_4	0.763			
Perceived Values	Values_1	0.832	0.899	0.849	0.689
	Values_2	0.839			
	Values_3	0.825			
	Values_4	0.824			
Destination Competitiveness	DC_1	0.804	0.894	0.841	0.678
	DC_2	0.871			
	DC_3	0.832			
	DC_4	0.785			

Note: CC_1 was deleted due to low loadings.

a. Composite Reliability (CR)

b. Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

Table-2. Discriminant Validity of Constructs

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Accessibility	0.846					
2. Cultural Uniqueness	0.504	0.805				
3. Perceived Values	0.613	0.717	0.830			
4. Carrying Capacity	0.450	0.584	0.550	0.804		
5. Natural Resources	0.565	0.591	0.639	0.535	0.794	
6. Destination Competitiveness	0.499	0.627	0.521	0.442	0.513	0.824

Note: Diagonals represent the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) while the other entries represent the correlations.

3.2. Assessment of the Structural Model

Next, Table 3 presents the results from hypotheses testing. The rule of thumb for one-tailed hypotheses testing is t-value should exceed 1.645 or 2.33 while probability value, p-value must be lower than 0.01 or 0.05 significance respectively. The statistical results indicated that two of the direct relationship hypotheses tested were found supported. Accessibility and cultural uniqueness were found to have significant relation to tourism competitive advantage from both domestic and foreign tourists' perspectives. Surprisingly, the remaining three hypotheses, which are hypothesized with the significant relationship between latent variables, namely natural resources, carrying capacity, and perceived value were not supported as result shown that they were not significant. On top of that, the variation inflation factor (VIF) values were also obtained to test the multicollinearity issue among the constructs. Based on suggestion by Bock *et al.* (2005), the results indicated that all the VIF values were below 10, thus it is confirmed that no multicollinearity issue exists among the constructs.

Table-3. Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	Standard Beta	Standard Error	t-value	p-value	Decision	VIF	f ²
H1	Resources >> Competitiveness	0.118	0.078	1.513	0.07	Not Supported	2.047	0.062
H2	Accessibility >> Competitiveness	0.195	0.077	2.546	<0.01	Supported	1.834	0.104
H3	Uniqueness >> Competitiveness	0.486	0.072	6.768	<0.01	Supported	2.735	0.310
H4	Carrying Capacity >> Competitiveness	0.000	0.080	0.005	0.50	Not Supported	1.704	0.000
H5	Perceived values >> Competitiveness	0.061	0.079	0.774	0.22	Not Supported	2.713	0.033

4. Discussion

The resulting analysis for hypothesis 2 demonstrated that accessibility is positively related to destination competitiveness in the context of Semenggoh Nature Reserve. As the result reveals, accessibility of the destination can be concluded as a determinant of destination competitiveness, specifically in Semenggoh Nature Reserve. In other words, this dimension of accessibility plays a significant role in determining the competitiveness in a tourism destination. Destination accessibility enables the movement of tourists from their origins to arrive in their desired destinations by offering a range of transportation modes (Hall, 2004). Guiver and Stanford (2014), suggested that destinations with good quality of accessibility are capable of attracting new market while enhancing the travel experiences among tourists. The finding is congruent with past study where quality accessibility of a destination leads to effective development of competitiveness in that particular destination (Law and Lo, 2016). Thus, it is undeniable that the dimension of accessibility in Semenggoh Nature Reserve has been perceived by the visiting tourists as determinant of its destination competitiveness.

In addition, it was discovered that cultural uniqueness has a significant positive impact on destination competitiveness, thus supporting hypothesis 3. In brief, cultural uniqueness is positively related to the competitiveness in the destination of Semenggoh Nature Reserve. The element of uniqueness in a destination is notable especially in the branding progression (Ryan, 2005). According to Damanik and Weber (2006), attractions in a tourism destination must comprise numerous features such as originality, diversity, validity, and uniqueness leading to satisfactory level of experience among tourists (Putri, 2017). Subsequently, the outcomes are aligned with previous investigation by Gupta and Singh (2019) where cultural element is positively related to a destination's competitiveness. In this case, tourists have perceived cultural uniqueness as an important factor leading to destination competitiveness of Semenggoh Nature Reserve.

The findings demonstrated that three of the other competitiveness determinants (e.g., natural resources, carrying capacity, & perceived values) do not have any significant relationship with tourism destination competitiveness. The statistical finding of hypothesis 1 has indicated that natural resources has no significant impact on destination competitiveness. The reason could be that the tourists, who are the nature lovers in this case, are unaware of the significance of the natural environment due to the fact that they are constantly exposed to abundant of natural resources. Furthermore, the findings also revealed that carrying capacity was not significantly related to destination competitiveness, hence, hypothesis 4 was rejected. There is a contradiction between these findings with the findings by Liu (2003) and Mathew (2009), nonetheless, it is reasonable by the fact that the current tourists' arrivals are still manageable whereby the destination is capable of handle more visitations. On the other hand, the statistical analysis of hypothesis 5 has demonstrated that there is no significant relationship between perceived values and destination competitiveness. These discoveries are not aligned to the previous investigations by Bajis (2015). This can be explained referring to the actual fact that Semenggoh Nature Reserve is providing satisfactory amount of values in return as perceived by the tourists. It can be inferred that this particular destination has achieved tourists' expectation in terms of values received in comparison with the price that the individuals have tolerated during their visits.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the competitiveness of a tourism destination is highly dependent on its accessibility (Porto et al., 2017; Vila et al., 2015). Generally, both local and international tourists visit ecotourism destination, or known as nature protected areas for short getaway from stressful environment of working. Nonetheless, there is a likelihood that a tourism destination to encounter diminution in its environmental resources due to the increment in tourists' arrivals without proper destination management. In fact, there is necessity at tourism destination resources (e.g., natural or man-made) to be at respectable quality in order to maintain its comparative and competitive advantage as well as its market position among its competitors (Angelkova et al., 2012; Zehrer et al., 2017). Henceforth, this study has revealed and confirmed that tourists believed destination accessibility is the main determinant for the development of ecotourism destination competitiveness. Similarly, the significance of cultural uniqueness of a touristic destination was also discovered as a contributor to its comparative advantage. This is due to the fact that tourists are mostly drawn towards attractive and exclusive cultural element possessed by a destination for satisfactory experience of travel. Consequently, inimitable cultural features in a destination give rise to tourists' satisfaction, thus, leading tourists to perceive the dimension of cultural uniqueness as a determinant of competitiveness in a destination.

Additionally, this study provided results to be an addition to the growing research body on the identification of determinants of destination competitiveness concerning ecotourism. Moreover, this study attempts to further understand both international and local tourists' perspectives towards the impact of destination's resources and qualifying determinants on destination competitiveness from ecotourism destination. Thus, these findings can be valuable to local planner, policy creators, and business operatives to ensure ecotourism destination undergoes effective development. There has been extension in the significance of destination competitiveness in present competitive market, particularly in ecotourism context. The indispensable attractors are profoundly dependent on the availability of tourism amenities and destination cultural distinctiveness. Hence, the stance of competitive and sustainability for an ecotourism destination is influenced by the variety of destination core resources and supporting factors. Therefore, further investigation into destination resources and destination competitiveness is strongly recommended.

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