

THE IMPACT OF NATURAL RESOURCES, CULTURAL HERITAGE, AND SPECIAL EVENTS ON TOURISM DESTINATION COMPETITIVENESS: THE MODERATING ROLE OF COMMUNITY SUPPORT

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ABSTRACT

Tourism destination competitiveness has been proven as one of the crucial factors to improve the performance of rural tourism destination. It is important for a tourism destination to possess the uniqueness of rural destinations in term of its nature, culture and ethnics because these are the factors that attract tourists' attention and intention to visit. Hence, this study intends to investigate the impacts of natural resources, cultural heritage, and special events on tourism destination competitiveness from the tourists' perspective. Moreover, this is the first known study to adopt community support as the moderating variable to examine its moderating impact among the constructs. A total of 210 respondents had completed the questionnaires. To assess the developed model, SmartPLS (version 3.2.6) is applied based on path modeling and then bootstrapping. The results revealed that natural resources, cultural heritage, and special events are significantly and positively correlated to tourism destination competitiveness from tourists' perspective. Surprisingly, community support was found to be no moderating relationship among the constructs. The implications, limitations, and directions for future research are further discussed.

Keywords: Natural Resources; Cultural Heritage; Special Events; Rural Tourism Destination Competitiveness; Community Support; Moderator; Tourists' Perspectives.

1. INTRODUCTION

Within Malaysia, it is noticeable that rural tourism is increasingly viewed as an alternative income generation activity for rural communities (Akbar, Zahari & Dusi, 2016; Falak, Lo & Yeo, 2016). Realising the potential positive impacts brought by the rural tourism activities, thus, it is worthy to take an in-depth investigation into identifying models to enhance the performance of rural tourism

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destination. Past researchers (e.g., Yoon, 2002; Wilde & Cox, 2008; Barbosa, Oliveira & Rezende, 2010; Chen, Chen, Lee & Tsai, 2016) have repeatedly investigating factors that contributes to destination competitiveness. In the similar vein, much authors have also examined its application in the rural tourism context (Mihalič, 2000; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Law & Lo, 2016). The uniqueness of rural destinations in term of its nature, cultural and ethnical elements have successfully attract tourists' attention and intention to visit (Hernandez, Suarez-Vega & Jimenez, 2016). These are the natural factors that enhance the value and competitiveness of a tourism destination.

Tourists spending are the main resources to enhance the local economy performance (Engström & Kipperberg, 2015). One of the biggest contemporary threats for the development of successful rural tourism destination is the growing competition among the rural tourism industries (Lo, Songan, Ramayah, Yeo & Nair, 2013). The service sector has been experiencing a stiff competition within the industry for decades, and this is not an exception to the rural tourism sector (Chon, Uysal, Fesenmaier & O'Leary, 2014; Ramseook-Munhurrin, Naidoo, Seebaluck & Pillai, 2016). On the other hand, past studies have found that there is an increasing trend of declining numbers of tourists' visitation to tourism destination, and most of the reasons are due to dissatisfaction among tourists toward the quality of services and products provided (Arabatzis & Grigoroudis, 2009; Yusof & Rahman, 2011). Previous investigations by Barsky and Nash, (2002) and Carneiro, Lima and Silva, (2015) have revealed that an in-depth knowledge of tourists' perceptions is vital in determining the competitiveness of tourism destinations. Hence, this study intends to investigate the impacts of natural resources, cultural heritage, and special events on the development of rural tourism destination competitiveness from rural tourists' perspectives. In addition to that, community support is adopted as the moderating variable to examine its moderation impacts among the constructs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

2.1. *Tourism Destination Competitiveness*

A destination competitiveness is defined as the ability of a destination to create and integrate value-added products that sustain its resources overtime while maintaining market position relative to competitors (Hassan, 2000). Crouch and Ritchie (1999) has proposed one of the well-known destination competitiveness model to highlight the used of core resources, attractors, and business-related factors to determine the competitiveness of a tourism destination (Lee & King, 2008). Buhalis (2000) and Hassan (2000) have proved in their studies that both tourism core resources and attractors are the important factors that contribute to the tourism destination competitiveness. Past studies have also propounded that the necessity to develop tourism destination competitiveness for the sustainability of rural tourism destinations (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Lee & King, 2008).

2.2. *Natural Resources*

Crouch and Ritchie (1999) provide a definition for natural resources, and it is defined as the nature of the core resources of the environment, which includes the flora and fauna species. The tourism destinations are the amalgam of tourism products (e.g., environmental resources, range of facilities

and services) to attract tourists' visit (Dwyer & Kim, 2003). The environmental resources or the natural resources are considered as one of the main attractions for tourists in making travel decision particularly in the context of rural tourism (Lane, 2009). Hence, it is therefore advisable to conserve natural resources in order to maintain the quality of the rural tourism products (Sok, 2010; Reimer & Walter, 2013).

2.3. Cultural Heritage

The UNESCO convention on world heritage (1972) defined cultural heritage as it is the combination for material manifestations, living expression, and as well as the traditions of the communities. According to Kovathanakul (2006), she defined cultural heritage as an inheritance from the past which contains events, places, and people. In the similar vein, Lertcharnrit (2008) has provided another version of definition for cultural heritage, and it is explainable in a way that these products are range from antiquities, artwork, monuments, sites, heritage buildings, and historical urban areas with the characteristic of intrinsic values (Sarttata, 2010). As stated by Liu (2013) and Park (2014) that cultural heritage plays an important role in tourism destinations, due to the facts that millions of people have already travelled across the globe just to experience different types of heritage (Dallen, 2006).

2.4. Special Events

Özdemir Bayrak (2011) propounded that special events comprised of various short-term activities to pull tourists to make a temporary visit. Past studies have envisaged that special events as one of the key determinants to enhance tourism destination's appeal (Wu & Zheng, 2014), and to motivate tourists in making choice of tourism destinations (Maneenetr & Tran, 2014). As stated by Lee, Lee, and Wick (2004), events provide the opportunities for tourists to experience the uniqueness of the local cultural and heritage besides the joyfulness. This is further supported by Kim and Damhorst (2010) that one of the objectives in organising events is to provide the opportunities for tourists to experience the local culture.

2.5. Community Support

It was documented by past studies that the support from local community is essential in ensuring sustainable development of rural tourism industry (Sharma & Dyer, 2009; Scales, 2014) because the local communities are the sole and the most convenience human capital resources for rural tourism development. The success and failure of rural tourism development are often related to the degree of local community support (Jaafar, Kayat, Tangit & Yacob, 2013). As mentioned by Spencer and Nsiah (2013), community support plays a pivotal role in ensuring the success of rural tourism development. It is because local communities are the one who provide tourism product and hospitality to visitors. A recent study by Lo, Chin and Law (2017) has proven that community support exists in moderating the relationship between accommodation quality and rural tourism destination competitiveness. Thus, this study adopted community support as the moderator and testing its moderating impacts among the proposed constructs.

2.6. Hypotheses Development

(a) Natural Resources, Cultural Heritage, and Special Events on Tourism Destination Competitiveness

Competitiveness theory is adopted as the underpin theory to guide the development of proposed framework and the development of hypotheses. This study holds a belief that the natural resources, cultural heritage, and special events are positive significantly related to rural tourism destination competitiveness. These notions are derived from past studies and showing that all these three constructs are related to tourism destination competitiveness. Researchers in the past (e.g., Buhalis, 2000; Mihalič, 2000) have elucidated that natural resources are the paramount factor in contributing to the development of rural tourism destination competitiveness. Past studies have demonstrated that natural resources significantly contribute to the tourism's competitive advantage (Yoon, 2002) and the development of sustainable environment (Ferrari, Mondejar & Vargas, 2010). On the other hand, Krajnovicel, Carlin and Rajko (2008), and Dugulan, Balaure, Popescu and Veghes (2010) have found that cultural heritage as the pivotal factor in determining tourism destination competitiveness. Based on the above discussion, the hypotheses developed as following:

- H1* : Natural resources are positively related to tourism destination competitiveness in rural tourism destination.
- H2* : Cultural heritage is positively related to tourism destination competitiveness in rural tourism destination.
- H3* : Special events are positively related to tourism destination competitiveness in rural tourism destination.

(b) The Moderating Role of Community Support on Natural Resources, Cultural Heritage, and Special Events towards Tourism Destination Competitiveness

Past studies have envisaged that the importance of community support for the development of tourism destination competitiveness (Spenser & Nsiah, 2013; Scales, 2014). Mbaiwa and Stronza (2011) highlights the importance of getting the support from local communities in natural resources decision making for tourism activities because communities claim that the natural resources are derived from their living location and hence it is belonged to them (Deery, Jago & Fredline, 2012). Therefore, it is important to get their consent and support prior to the usage of those resources for tourism activities (Mihalič, 2000). Past studies have demonstrated that community support for tourism development in a tourism destination does creates additional advantage to the destination itself as compare to other tourism destinations (Di Foggia & Lazzarotti, 2012; Lo, et al., 2013). Based on the above discussion, the hypotheses developed as following:

- H4* : The positive relationship between natural resources and tourism destination competitiveness will be enhanced when community support is high.
- H5* : The positive relationship between cultural heritage and tourism destination competitiveness will be enhanced when community support is high.
- H6* : The positive relationship between special events and tourism destination competitiveness will be enhanced when community support is high.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research site of this study is at Sarawak River, located in the city of Kuching and recognized as an important source of water and transportation for the inhabitants in southwestern Sarawak. One of the settlements at the bank of Sarawak River is Kampung Boyan, one of the authentic Malay villages which is renowned for its traditional Malay snacks, dishes, seafood, and the famous Kuih Lapis (layered cake). This study adopted a quantitative approach and survey questionnaires were used as the research instruments for data collection. The questionnaire consists of two sections. Section A consists of multiple items to measure the proposed research model, namely natural resources, cultural heritage, special events, community support, and tourism destination competitiveness, whereas Section B is to collect demographic information of the respondents. A total of 39 items were adapted from previous studies (Yoon, 2002; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Kozak, Baloglu & Bahar, 2009; Lee & King, 2009) and modified to adapt to the Malaysian context. The respondents were asked to respond to each statement based on a seven-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). During the data collection process, a non-probability sampling, specifically, a simple random and purposive sampling technique was applied, i.e., the selection of any in tourists at the age of in between 16 and 60 years old have the probability of being chosen as participants. A total of 210 respondents had completed the questionnaires. Prior to measurement and structural analyses, the data were first went through a series of preliminary analysis via Statistical Package for Social Science 23.0 (SPSS). This is to ensure that the collected data were free from missing values, issue of straight lining, and fit to proceed for measurement and structural analysis. The SmartPLS (version 3.2.6, Ringle, Wende & Becker, 2015) was used to perform the PLS-SEM analysis to assess the research model. The two-step analysis approach was used to analyse the data (Ramayah, Yeap & Ignatius, 2013; Hair, Hult, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2014). Bootstrapping was conducted with 500 resamples to generate the standard errors of the estimation and t-values. Blindfolding was performed to check the predictive relevance of the model.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Assessment of the Measurement Model

First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to test the item reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the measurement scales. As shown in Table 1, all the items loading exceeded the minimum cut off point of 0.50 (Bagozzi, Yi & Philipps, 1991), thus, the internal consistency was achieved. In terms of convergent validity, all the composite reliability (CR) values were above the minimum cut off point of 0.7 (Chin, 2010) and all of the average variance extracted (AVE) values met the minimum criteria of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2014). For discriminant validity (see Table 2), following the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion, the value of AVE 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 satisfactory and provided sufficient evidences in terms of reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The coefficient of determination (R^2) was 0.413 for corporate social responsibility, which explained more than 41.3% of the construct. This was way above the 0.26 value as suggested by Cohen (1998), indicating a substantial model where the R^2 was 0.67, moderate model where the R^2 0.33 and weak model where the R^2 0.19.

Table 1: Results of Measurement Model

Construct	Items	Loadings	CR	AVE
Community Support	LocalComm_56	0.881	0.941	0.725
	LocalComm_57	0.806		
	LocalComm_58	0.859		
	LocalComm_59	0.856		
	LocalComm_60	0.844		
	LocalComm_61	0.861		
Cultural Heritage	Culture_08	0.867	0.955	0.752
	Culture_09	0.882		
	Culture_10	0.863		
	Culture_11	0.913		
	Culture_12	0.899		
	Culture_13	0.865		
Natural Resources	NatuRes_01	0.702	0.932	0.665
	NatuRes_02	0.687		
	NatuRes_03	0.824		
	NatuRes_04	0.813		
	NatuRes_05	0.877		
	NatuRes_06	0.925		
	NatuRes_07	0.851		
Special Events	SpecEvent_36	0.883	0.951	0.794
	SpecEvent_37	0.894		
	SpecEvent_38	0.897		
	SpecEvent_39	0.877		
	SpecEvent_40	0.904		
Tourism Destination Competitiveness	DestCompe_62	0.757	0.946	0.556
	DestCompe_63	0.686		
	DestCompe_64	0.759		
	DestCompe_65	0.649		
	DestCompe_66	0.759		
	DestCompe_67	0.788		
	DestCompe_68	0.725		
	DestCompe_69	0.769		
	DestCompe_70	0.744		
	DestCompe_71	0.772		
	DestCompe_72	0.772		
	DestCompe_73	0.770		
	DestCompe_74	0.827		
	DestCompe_75	0.634		

Note: ^a CR = Composite Reliability; ^b AVE = Average Variance Extracted.

Table 2: Discriminant Validity of Constructs

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Community Support	0.852				
2. Cultural Heritage	0.166	0.867			
3. Natural Resources	0.217	0.060	0.815		
4. Special Events	0.273	0.204	0.314	0.891	
5. Tourism Destination Competitiveness	0.352	0.201	0.517	0.371	0.745

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

Table 3: Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	Standard Beta	Standard Error	t-value	Decision	VIF
H1	Natural Resources → Tourism Destination Competitiveness	0.388	0.063	6.158**	Supported	1.174
H2	Cultural Heritage → Tourism Destination Competitiveness	0.124	0.060	2.066*	Supported	1.075
H3	Special Events → Tourism Destination Competitiveness	0.139	0.070	2.001*	Supported	1.234
H4	Community Support Moderate Natural Resources and TDC	-0.099	0.107	0.921	Not Supported	1.171
H5	Community Support Moderate Cultural Heritage and TDC	0.126	0.097	1.298	Not Supported	1.070
H6	Community Support Moderate Special Events and TDC	-0.117	0.068	1.731	Not Supported	1.208

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

4.2. Assessment of the Structural Model

Next, Table 3 present the results of the hypotheses testing. The statistical results showed that three out of six hypotheses proposed and tested were supported. The results revealed that all the three direct hypotheses were supported, namely natural resources, cultural heritage, and special events were found positively significant in relation to tourism destination competitiveness, whereas all the three moderating hypotheses were rejected. Thus, H1, H2, and H3 were supported, and H4, H5, and H6 were rejected. Table 3 shows that the variation inflation factor (VIF) values were in the range of 1.070 and 1.234, which is less than 10. Therefore, it is confirmed that no multicollinearity exists among the constructs (Bock, Zmud, Kim & Lee, 2005).

5. DISCUSSION

Realizing the importance of identifying factors contributing to the development of rural tourism destination competitiveness, this study investigated the impact of natural resources, cultural heritage, and special events on tourism destination competitiveness from tourists' perspectives. As expected the empirical results showed that natural resources had a positive significant impact on tourism destination competitiveness ($\beta = 0.388$; $t = 6.158$; $p < 0.01$), and thus H1 was supported. It is justifiable that tourists believed the availability of quality natural resources is important to the development of rural tourism destination competitiveness. Past studies have confirmed the importance of conserving the natural resources as it is the basis of rural tourism product (Sok, 2010;

Reimer & Walter, 2013). Moreover, the findings for hypothesis 2 showed that cultural heritage had a positive significant impact on tourism destination competitiveness ($\beta = 0.124$; $t = 2.066$; $p < 0.05$), and hence H2 was supported. One plausible explanation for the findings of H2 is that the tourists are attracted by the availability of cultural and heritage elements of the tourism destination, therefore, it is identified as the crucial factors for the development of rural tourism destination competitiveness. On the other hand, the findings of Hypothesis 3 suggest that special events are positively related to tourism destination competitiveness ($\beta = 0.139$; $t = 2.001$; $p < 0.05$). The findings of this study are congruent to the study of Kamarul and Dahnil (2012) found that there is a significant relationship between special events and tourism destination competitiveness.

Surprisingly, the findings of this study have had revealed that three of the proposed moderating hypotheses were rejected. The statistical findings indicated that H4 ($\beta = -0.099$; $t = 0.921$), H5 ($\beta = 0.126$; $t = 1.298$), and H6 ($\beta = -0.117$; $t = 1.731$) were statistically incapability to show a positive significant relationship among the proposed constructs. One plausible justification is that tourists who visited Sarawak River do not perceived community support as one of the significant factors for the development of tourism destination competitiveness possibly due to their limited time exposed and interacted with local communities. Hence, tourists do not get much opportunities in interacting with the local communities and experience the local hospitality, and thus tourists believed that community support do not moderate the relationship among natural resources, cultural heritage, and special events on tourism destination competitiveness.

6. CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In summary, this study provides empirical evidence for the influence of natural resources, cultural heritage, and special events on rural tourism destination competitiveness from the perspective of tourists. The empirical evidence provided by this study offers actionable information to tourism planners and policy makers on the importance of conserving the natural resources, cultural heritage, and organizing events from time to time because these are the factors that have greatest influence on rural tourism destination competitiveness. As this study only incorporated tourists and their perceptions on natural resources, cultural heritage, and special events towards the development of rural tourism destination competitiveness, a wider concept and the perspective of different respondents (e.g., local community and tourism players) should be integrated to get more generalized results. Next, this study adopted community support as the moderating variable in linking the relationship between the independent constructs and tourism destination competitiveness. In future research, researchers may have considered to include other moderator variables in examining the proposed framework.

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