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An Examination of the Relationship between Quality of Tourism Experience and Perceived Destination Competitiveness: The Tourists' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Destination competitiveness has been seen as a critical issue in today's increasingly challenging tourism market. The study develops a destination competitiveness model based on tourists' perception and attempted to investigate how different phases of tourism/vacation experience affect tourists' perception of the destination competitiveness. The proposed theoretical model addresses the tourism experience from the chronological and temporal aspects, i.e., tourist pre-trip planning experience, en-route experience, on-site experience, and after-trip reflection. Tourist involvement is proposed to have a moderating effect on the relationship between tourism experience dimensions and destination competitive domains. The results indicate that tourists' perception of destination competitiveness is positively influenced by the quality of tourism experience in terms of all phases (pre-trip planning, en-route experience, on-site instrumental experience, on-site expressive experience, and after-trip reflection). Findings also indicate that tourist involvement has a moderating effect on the relationship between tourist pre-trip planning experience, en-route experience, on-site expressive experience, and perceived destination competitiveness.

INTRODUCTION

Studies have indicated that tourists and their needs stand as the ultimate driving force which influences the competition and competitiveness in the tourism destination (Ritchie & Crouch, 2000b, 2003). The competitive advantage of a destination closely relates to the quality of the product offered, i.e., the quality of tourism experience provided by the destination. Today, destinations eventually compete on the quality of tourism experience offered to visitors (Dwyer et al., 2004; Dwyer & Kim, 2003). In a highly competitive tourism destination market, tourists' experiences and their opinions should be understood in order to enhance the performance of destination products and promote destination development strategies.

The current literature of destination competitiveness has attempted to develop the concepts and relevant models, with a focus on how to improve destination competitiveness in response to market competition (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Hudson,

Ritchie, & Timur, 2004; Enright & Newton, 2004, 2005; Dwyer et al., 2004). However, limited research has been undertaken to examine destination competitiveness from the tourists' perspective and provide a conceptual and empirically testable model which is related to the quality of tourism experience. The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between quality of tourism experience and tourists' perception of destination competitiveness.

A destination competitiveness model based on the perceptions of tourists and a measurement instrument to assess the constructs of the model is developed for this study. The model proposes that tourists' perceived destination competitiveness is affected by the quality of tourist experience, which includes the experience in pre-trip planning, en-route, on-site, and after-trip (reflection) phases (Jennings & Weiler, 2006; Vitterso et al., 2000; Clawson & Knetsch, 1966; Laws, 1995; Neal et al., 1999, 2004). Furthermore, tourist involvement, as an important salient dimension of consumer behavior, is introduced into the model as a moderating factor in the relationship between quality of tourism experience and perceived destination competitiveness (Broderic & Mueller, 1999; Havitz & Dimanche, 1990, 1997, 1999; Dimanche et al., 1991; Kapferer & Laurent, 1993). Accordingly, the study proposes two major propositions: (1) The quality of tourism experience (including pre-trip planning, en-route, on-site experience, and after-trip reflection) has a positive influence on tourists' perceived destination competitiveness; and (2) The relationship between the quality of tourism experience in different phases and perceived destination competitiveness is moderated by the level of tourist involvement. These two major propositions contain eight specific hypotheses.

Figure 1 presents the model that incorporates the study hypotheses. The model demonstrates direct relationships among different phases of tourism experience and perceived destination competitiveness, and the moderating role of tourist involvement between tourism experience and perceived destination competitiveness.

METHODS

The survey instrument was developed and refined based on the literature review and an open-ended survey, as well as an in-depth focus group study conducted with the faculty and graduate students in the Hospitality and Tourism Management program at a university in southeast Virginia. The content validity was assessed and the measurement items were refined based on the feedback from the tourism professionals. The scale was then pre-tested and further refined by distributing to 840 undergraduate students in the university. The pretest results demonstrated satisfactory scores on the reliability coefficients of the constructs ($\alpha > .70$).

Regarding the data collection, the sample population of this study consists of residents of Virginia who are 18 years old or above and took at least one leisure trip away from home in the past 18 months. The sample for this study was proportionally stratified on the basis of the population of the counties and cities in Virginia and was randomly selected from each county and city. Respondents were asked to complete a self-administered survey based on their vacation experience and their perception of the destination competitiveness. A total of 3,000 questionnaires were mailed and 353 usable questionnaires were utilized in the data analysis of the study. The data were checked for the representativeness and non-response and late-response bias. The results showed that there were no statistical differences on the

demographic characteristics between the sample and the census data. The sample was also free from non-response and late-response bias.

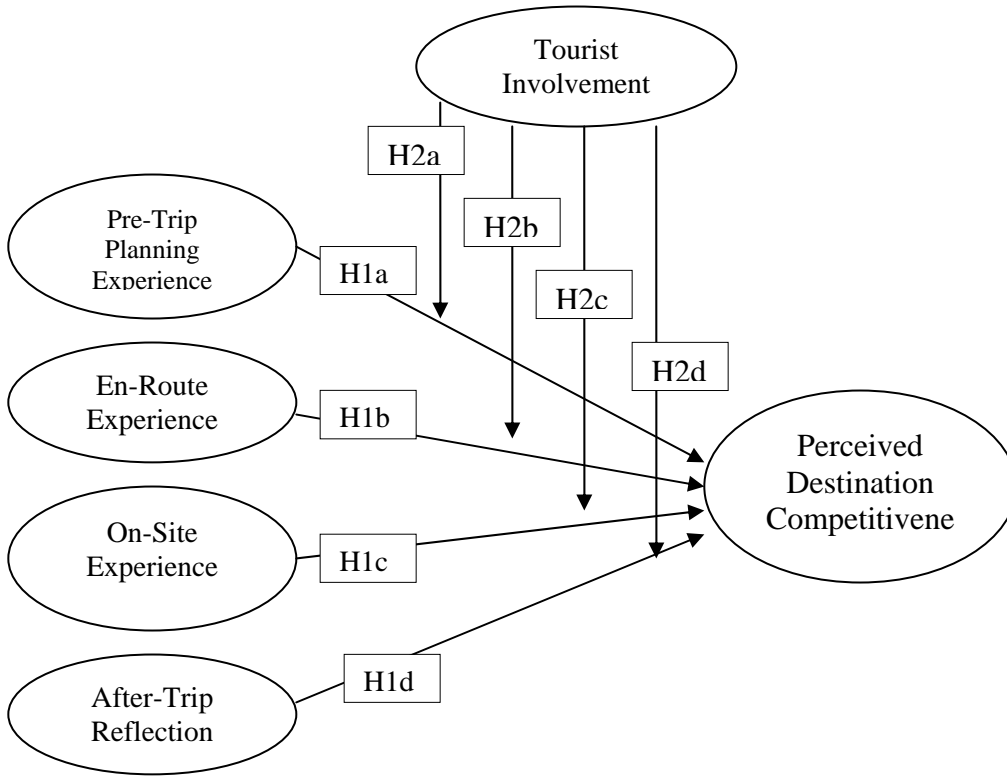


Figure 1. Proposed Destination Competitiveness Model based on Tourists' Perception

FINDINGS

The demographic information showed that among the 348 respondents who provided gender information, 170 (48.9%) were male, whereas 178 (51.1%) were female respondents. The majority of the respondents were middle aged or older. Most of the respondents were Caucasian (80.6%) and married (69.5%). In terms of the level of education, 39.4% of the respondents had college degrees, and 37.6% of the respondents had graduate education. About 22.0% of the respondents reported an annual household income of \$120,000 or more, whereas 10.4% reported income less than \$20,000.

Confirmatory factor analysis was performed to confirm the factor structure of each construct in the model. Five constructs of tourism experience were identified: pre-trip planning experience, en-route experience, on-site instrumental experience, on-site expressive experience, and after-trip reflection. The perceived destination competitiveness also contained five sub-dimensions, which included accessibility and information availability, environment, tourism attributes, price and value, and destination management and marketing. The score of items for each sub-dimension of the destination competitiveness perception was summated and used to measure the proposed constructs. Based on the confirmatory factor analysis results, the measurement scales were further refined and demonstrated satisfactory goodness-of-fit indices.

The five tourism experience constructs (exogenous) and one destination competitiveness construct (endogenous) were tested in the model using the LISREL 8.51 structural equation

analysis package (Jöreskog & Sorbom, 2001) with maximum likelihood (ML) method of estimation. The results showed that the structural coefficients and t-values associated with these pairs of constructs were statistically and positively significant. The study revealed that tourists' perception of destination competitiveness is positively influenced by the quality of tourism experience in terms of different phases, i.e., pre-trip planning, en-route experience, on-site experience (which include two dimensions: instrumental and expressive experience), and after-trip reflection. Tourist on-site experience and destination competitiveness showed the strongest relationship (the highest path coefficient score).

Table 1. Results of the Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Hypothesized Path	Standardized Coefficients	t-value
H2a	TP→DC (γ_{11})	.14	2.59**
H2b	ER→DC (γ_{12})	.17	2.03*
H2c	OSI→DC (γ_{13})	.26	3.25**
H2d	OSE→DC (γ_{14})	.45	5.29**
H2e	AT→DC (γ_{15})	.09	2.19*

Note: * $p < .05$ ($t=1.96$) ** $p < .01$ ($t=2.58$)

TP: Pre-trip planning experience, ER: En-route experience, OSI: On-site instrumental experience, OSE: On-site expressive experience, AT: After-trip reflection, DC: Perceived destination competitiveness

Furthermore, respondents were categorized into low and high involvement groups based on the factor-cluster analysis of the tourist involvement items. Involvement appears to have a moderating effect on the relationship between pre-trip planning experience, en-route experience, on-site expressive experience, and perceived destination competitiveness. The impact of pre-trip planning experience and on-site experience on perceived destination competitiveness was stronger for the high involvement group than for the low involvement group. However, the influence of en-route experience on perceived destination competitiveness seemed stronger for low involvement group than for high involvement group.

Table 2. Moderating Effect of Tourist Involvement (Low vs. High Involvement)

	Chi-square (χ^2)	df	$\Delta \chi^2$	Δdf	p-value
Base model	638.50	310	-	-	-
TP	642.35	311	3.85	1	<.05
ER	643.75	311	5.25	1	<.05
OSI	638.56	311	.06	1	>.05
OSE	645.39	311	6.89	1	<.05
AT	638.56	311	.06	1	>.05

Note: TP: Pre-trip planning experience, ER: En-route experience, OSI: On-site instrumental experience, OSE: On-site expressive experience, AT: After-trip reflection

APPLICATION OF RESULTS

Tourists' perceptions on what is a high quality vacation experience and how they perceive destination competitiveness could provide important insights to destination managers and marketers. The results indicate that the quality of vacation experience during the different phases has significant influence on tourists' perception of destination competitiveness. In other words, if tourists have a high quality vacation experience, they would perceive the destination superior and more competitive than other alternative or similar destinations.

Based on the research findings, destination managers and marketers could have a better understanding on the factors they need to focus on in each phase to ensure a high-quality tourism experience. Destination managers/marketers need to pay special attention to the quality of on-site experience. At the same time, it is important to develop a partnership or alliance with businesses which handle ground transportation at the destination, when considering the strategic development and management of a high-quality tourism experience package offered to visitors. High-involvement tourists need to receive more attention since their perceived destination competitiveness tends to be more influenced by their reported quality of tourism experience. For the low involvement tourists, it is important to specifically focus on the en-route experience for this group in addition to their on-site experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

Destination competitiveness is a comparatively new point of discussion in the area of tourism destination research. Given the fact that there are a limited number of empirical studies on tourism destination competitiveness, especially from the demand side perspective, this study initiated the development of a theoretical framework to examine the destination competitiveness from the tourists' perspective by understanding the relationship between different phases of tourism experience and tourists' perceived destination competitiveness. This study concludes that in order to increase the perceived destination competitiveness in tourists' mind, it is necessary for destination managers and marketers to provide an overall high-quality tourism experience to visitors. Future research is suggested to test the model in other regions and possibly refine the conceptual framework. It is also necessary to build on the conceptual framework which combines the demand and supply side of the destination competitiveness in terms of concept, perceptions, and practices.

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