EXPLORING DESTINATION PERSONALITY AND ELETRONIC WORD OF MOUTH INFLUENCES ON TRAVEL DECISIONS USING STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODELLING

An Nur Nabila Ismail[1]♣
Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan
annurnabila@uitm.edu.my

Nik Mohamad Shamim Nik Mohamad Zainordin[2]
Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan
nikshamim@uitm.edu.my

Yuhanis Abdul Aziz[3]
School of Business and Economics, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor,
yuhanis@upm.edu.my

Abstract: Langkawi Island is one of the top tourist destinations in Malaysia. Yet, there are still several factors that can contribute to its competitiveness in the tourism industry. The study emphasises destination personality as the factor that can stimulate travellers in determining holiday destinations. As information is considered important to tourists in selecting a holiday destination, the study also investigates the marketing effort by observing the elements of electronic word of mouth as sources for travellers to have some knowledge about the destination before they select it. 503 respondents were involved in this study and data were analysed using Structural Equation Modelling in Smart-PLS. The finding indicates that destination personality and electronic word of mouth have a significant relationship with destination choice. This finding helps the policymaker and business providers strategise their marketing effort to make Langkawi a competitive destination.

Keywords: Destination Choice, Destination Personality, Electronic Word-of-Mouth, Langkawi

1.   Introduction

According to Pearce (2005), tourism is a complicated phenomenon containing interconnected goods and facilities from private and public sectors. Tourism can also be described as activities of people who travel and choose to visit places that are different from their normal environment for less than a year for relaxation, business or other reasons (Libreros, 1998). From a financial perspective, the tourism sector is a key revenue source for many countries since travellers are good clients and service payees. In 2019, the travel and tourism industry performed well, becoming the third-largest sector with rapid development based on the gross domestic product (GDP), as shown in Figure 1.

As seen in Figure 1 below, the travel and tourism industry is growing quicker than in health care and social work, retail and wholesale distribution, agriculture, construction, and manufacturing industries. However, the development of travel and tourism industry is slower than the communication and financial service industries since the latter is a big global industry which is deeply significant for business.

♣ Corresponding author: An Nur Nabila Ismail, Faculty of Business Management, UiTM Cawangan Kelantan, Bukit Ilmu, 18500 Machang, Kelantan. Email: annurnabila@uitm.edu.my

Figure 1: GDP Growth for the World Industry
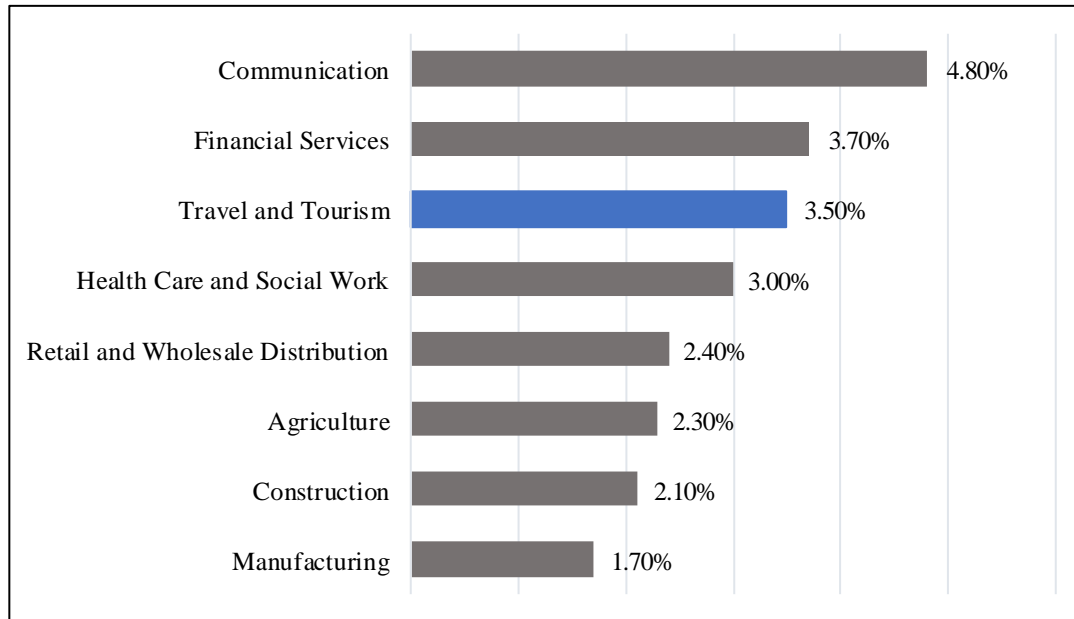
Source: World Travel & Tourism Council (2020)

Malaysia is recognised as a multi-cultural nation (Tourism Malaysia, 2018). However, for cultural resources and business travel, Malaysia only recorded a 2.6, while Indonesia recorded a 3.2, and Vietnam recorded a 2.9, both scoring more than Malaysia. This figure indicates that Malaysia requires extra development and improvement in several aspects in order to be competitive in the tourism sector.

Table 1: Tourism Competitiveness among Asia Countries

Country	Global Rank 2019	Global Rank 2018	Natural and cultural resources	
			Natural Resources	**Cultural resources and business travel**
Singapore	17	13	2.2	2.5
Malaysia	29	26	3.8	2.6
Thailand	31	34	**4.8**	2.6
Indonesia	40	42	**4.5**	**3.2**
Vietnam	63	67	3.8	**2.9**

Source: World Economic Forum (2019)

Basic tourist attractions such as beaches or sunsets are no longer distinguishing reasons among tourism destinations (George & Anandkumar, 2014). Therefore, the emphasis on destination personality generates a greater branding for destinations as the exclusive personality of the destination is emphasised (Hosany, Ekinci & Uysal, 2007). The concept of brand personality is relevant as a strong fundamental to distinguish various travel destinations (Murphy, Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2007). The destination personality may vary according to the location of the travel destination, whereas a city may have a dissimilar personality compared to an island (Greaves et al., 2015). The research is prepared to measure the personality of the island strongly prompts the current research to measure the personality of Langkawi as this may stimulate tourists' evaluation in making Langkawi their destination choice.

In intensely positioning a destination to appeal to potential tourists, marketing efforts should be given sufficient consideration. Chang and Wang (2019) found that roughly 60% of potential tourists use the Internet to get information from travel forums and personal blogs with post-travel experiences, comments and reviews, also known as electronic word of mouth (e-WOM). Moreover, Kanje et al.

(2020) emphasised that most travellers use e-WOM to identify others' experiences, gain some opinion about a certain destination and obtain suggestions from others.

Several factors can affect travellers in selecting a holiday destination and understanding these factors is vital. Masiero and Qiu (2018) emphasised that the complication in selecting a holiday destination suggested the inclusion of different consumer decision-making nuances. By understanding the reasons that stimulate destination choice, legislators and destination operators such as hoteliers, travel agents, and business operators can foster and improve their market approaches to cater to the needs and wants of travellers, motivating this study to examine destination choice when it comes to the island.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Destination Choice

Destination choice is the choice made by travellers when they have numerous alternatives (Liu, 2014). According to Hsu, Tsai and Wu (2009), destination choice can be defined as the tourist's choice of a particular travel destination. Numerous past studies have examined destination choice by using a variety of dimensions, such as Rizzi (2014), Isa and Ramli (2014), Tomic, Kovacevic, Berber and Milic (2014), and Mussalam and Tajeddini (2016). Rizzi (2014) examined the influences of visa application on travel destination perception and destination choice. This study measured the cost of a visa, application period, authorisation time, rejection chance, unclear instruction, required documents and embassy visit, which were tested against destination choice. The results indicated that the procedure for applying visa has a negative perception of a particular destination. On the other hand, Isa and Ramli (2014) examined indicators that influence travellers to visit a marine tourist destination, namely destination awareness, destination image, motivation, and word-of-mouth on the visitation performance (destination choice). Results revealed a significant relationship between destination awareness and visitation performance. When a tourist is aware of a destination, the probability of visiting the place is high. The findings also indicated that word-of-mouth has a full mediating effect on awareness of visitation performance.

A study by Mussalam and Tajeddini (2016) explored the differences between short and long holidays, highlighting how they can influence destination choice. This study measured destination choice using four attributes: destination brand, destination attraction, tourism facilities and tourism services. The results showed that each of the attributes has a different level of importance when selecting a short or long holiday. Based on the review of past studies, there are still gaps in the literature review that can be further explored. For example, the study of factors such as travel motivation, word-of-mouth, content marketing and destination personality have rarely been examined alongside destination choice, especially in the context of the island destination, which is Langkawi. Thus, the current study examines major factors that prompt tourists to visit a particular destination, specifically Langkawi, as a holiday destination.

2.2 Destination Personality

Destination personality is originated from brand personality. As defined by Aaker (1997), brand personality is the set of human characteristics that are related to a brand. Even though the brand is related to the product, people view it as having human characteristics such as competence, sophistication, excitement, sincerity and ruggedness (Aaker, 1997). The brand personality concept by Aaker (1997) is widely used by researchers. However, this brand personality scale (BPS) has received some critics from other researchers. BPS is considered as not measuring a brand personality but focusing more on numbers of brand identity which contain personality (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). In the context of tourism literature, destination personality is extended from brand personality. Ekinci and Hosany (2006) defined destination personality as a set of personality traits that is related to a destination. Moreover, destination personality also reflects the tourists' emotional attachment to the particular destination (Wang et al., 2022). According to Souiden, Ladhari and Chiadmi (2017), the concept of destination personality is still new and has received less attention from tourism research.

Today, travel destination faces intense competition since tourists often choose a destination with similar attraction such as beautiful panorama, beaches, good quality accommodation and a friendly community (Souiden, Ladhari & Chiadmi, 2017). In order to compete with other destinations, personality becomes an important factor which needs to be highlighted by the destination. A good destination personality will develop a positive global impression and can attract tourists to visit. Moreover, the personality of the destination not only can attract tourists to visit but also help them to access the similarity between their personality and destination personality (Chi, Pan & Chiappa, 2018). The current study has conceptualized destination personality as a pull factor that attracts tourists to visit travel destinations. With this understanding, the study concludes that destination personality acts as the external appeal that attracts tourists to choose travel destinations. Thus, the current study posits the following hypothesis:

H1: Destination personality significantly influences destination choice.

2.3 Electronic Word-of-Mouth

Park et al. (2011) emphasised that WOM is more influential compared to conventional advertising in terms of review. Moreover, Khan, Ramzan, Shoaib and Mohyuddin (2015) appealed that WOM works when previous and potential customers give positive or negative reactions to certain goods or services. If the response is positive, it enhances a marketing tool for the company. In the tourism sector, WOM also plays an essential part for travellers in selecting a particular destination. Wang (2015) claims that WOM offers travellers more information about a destination and can affect a tourist's decision in choosing a holiday destination. WOM can also be spread via the Internet and is identified as Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM). e-WOM can be distinct as any virtual positive or negative declaration delivered by potential, existent or former customers about certain goods or services (Jalilvand, Esfahani & Samiei, 2012).

Jalilvand and Samiei (2012) observed the connection of e-WOM with each element in the Theory of Planned Behaviour which is attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control and also examined the direct correlation of e-WOM and intention to travel. e-WOM was found to be able to provide prospective tourists positive information first. Thus, any negative information afterward could not affect their attitude. However, if prospective tourists are exposed to negative information first, they will react in a negative way and other positive information will not make a change. According to Ajzen (1991), subjective norms indicate the public pressure which may affect applying or not applying individual behaviour. e-WOM has been testified to have a significant impact on subjective norms. Pedersen (2001) found that WOM from family and colleagues are factors of subjective norms. Perceived behavioural control is also one of the effects of e-WOM, where Palka, Pousttchi and Wiedemann (2009) declared that information from WOM can stimulate the receiver's perceived behavioural control. Therefore, the following hypothesis is posited:

H2: e-WOM significantly influences destination choice

3. Methodology

The current research used a combination of the descriptive and casual research design to discover the cause and effect of destination personality and e-WOM (cause) on destination choice (effect). The current study implemented a cross-sectional survey method whereby questionnaires were distributed to Langkawi travellers within a single time frame. The current study used the technique of a self-administered questionnaire where respondents were approached and asked to fill out a hard copy of the questionnaire. Furthermore, the sample size was determined by applying Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) concept, where a sample size of 384 will be suggestive to represent a population of above 100,000 people. However, in order to cater to missing data and incomplete questionnaires, the researchers decided to collect data from 510 respondents.

The 5-point Likert Scale is one of the usual scales applied in social science research whereby Sachdev and Verma (2004) stated that it can lower respondents' annoyance levels and boost response quality. The scale is statement-based and in ascending order of (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral, (4) agree and (5) strongly agree. The survey was adapted from past studies by Hosany et al. (2007), Chen and Phou (2013) and Kumar and Nayak (2015) for destination personality, while questions for e-WOM were adopted from research by Jalilvand et al. (2013), Ishida et al. (2016) and Zarrad and Debabi (2015). Questions for destination choice were adopted from past studies by Zgolli and Zaiem (2018) and Um and Crompton (1990). The data were analysed using the partial least square method (PLS-SEM) as the study discovers the new phenomenon and syndicates it with current structural theory.

4. Result

510 questionnaires were distributed to respondents through a direct approach in Langkawi, where 503 questionnaires were finalised and ready for data analysis. Most of the respondents were males, with 256 respondents, while there were 247 female respondents. In terms of age group, 124 respondents were between the ages of 25 to 30 years old, 103 respondents were between the ages of 31 to 34 years old, and 101 respondents were between 35 to 40 years old. In the context of local nationality, 55.1% were Malay, 19.1% were Chinese and 5.4% were Indian. For non-Malaysians, the top three nationalities of participants in this study were China (24), Singapore (16) and Thailand (13).

4.1. Assessment of Measurement Model

As stated by Ramayah et al. (2018), a factor loading of 0.708 or higher is suggested but a loading between 0.700 to 0.500 is sufficient if the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite validity (CR) are higher. For AVE, the score must be more than 0.500, whereas CR should be greater than 0.700 (Hair et al., 2017). As portrayed in Table 2, all items met the threshold value for outer loading of more than 0.700. Furthermore, the AVE score for all constructs met the suggested value of more than 0.500. Additionally, all constructs were consistent as CR was more than 0.700 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Ramayah et al., 2018).

Heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlation was applied in this study to test discriminant validity. As shown in Table 3, the value for HTMT for all constructs was less than the conservative value of 0.85 (Kline, 2011), confirming its discriminant validity for all constructs.

Table 2: Measurement Properties of Reflective Construct (Factor Loading, AVE and CR

Construct	Items	Loading	AVE	CR
e-WOM	A1	0.729	0.657	0.905
	A2	0.836		
	A3	0.835		
	A4	0.837		
	A5	0.811		
Destination Personality	B1	0.782	0.546	0.856
	B2	0.698		
	B3	0.631		
	B4	0.771		
	B5	0.799		
Destination Choice	C1	0.771	0.507	0.802
	C2	0.564		
	C3	0.776		
	C4	0.716		

Table 3: Discriminant Validity using Fornell and Lacker Criterion

	DC	DP	e-WOM
Destination Choice (DC)	**0.712**		
Destination Personality (DP)	0.500	**0.739**	
e-WOM	0.447	0.439	**0.811**

4.2. *Assessment of Structural Model*

Path coefficient valuation is to screen the direct effect between independent variables on a dependent variable in the path model and to measure the significant effect of the suggested relationships between constructs using bootstrapping analysis. Hair et al. (2017) recommended that the t-value should be greater than 1.645 and the p-value less than 0.05. The first relationship, destination personality, shows a significant relationship with destination choice which the t-value and p-value are 7.325 and 0.000, respectively. e-WOM and destination choice have a t-value of 2.349 and a p-value of 0.01, indicating a relationship between e-WOM and destination choice.

Table 4: Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	R/ship	Std.Beta	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	DP > DC	0.292	0.040	7.325**	0.000	Significant
H2	e-WOM > DC	0.093	0.040	2.349**	0.010	Significant

5. Findings and Discussion

There is past research that has measured destination personality such as Souiden, Ladhari and Chiadmi (2017) as well as Kumar (2016), but none of these studies have explored the relationship between destination personality and destination choice, which will be a new contribution to the current research. Souiden, Ladhari and Chiadmi (2017) revealed that destination personality influences the tourist attitude and behaviour intention, which is quite similar whereby the finding indicates that destination personality influences the tourists to choose Langkawi as a destination. While Kumar (2016) found that destination personality positively influences destination loyalty and a study by Chi, Pan and Chiappa (2018) mentioned that destination personality also influences destination satisfaction. With this understanding, the service providers and the authority can strategise their marketing techniques which focus on highlighting Langkawi's personality, such as alive, adventurous, vibrant, good and peaceful in order to attract more tourists. By highlighting the personality or features of Langkawi, the right tourists can be encouraged to select Langkawi as their holiday destination.

The next relationship is between e-WOM and destination choice, where H2 suggests a relationship between e-WOM and destination choice. The results from this research have confirmed the findings of Ladhari and Michaud (2015) and Pietro, Virgilio and Pantano (2012) who found that information, feedback and review on social media influence the tourist attitude and behaviour in choosing a destination. As we are in a new era, e-WOM plays an important role as an information provider and it is easy to access. Based on the review and feedback from past travellers, the potential tourist will have an idea about the destination and influence them to choose one particular destination. As policymakers and business providers, they should take into consideration feedback as well as online comments. Moreover, this finding also can give an idea to the businesses to use an online platform to share information about their business as well as the uniqueness of holiday destination and making it accessible to potential tourists.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

The objective of this study was to explore the factors that influence tourists to choose Langkawi as their holiday destination. This study measured two main constructs: destination personality and e-WOM towards destination choice. Based on the result, both constructs are positively significant towards destination choice. This finding has proven that the personality of Langkawi and the information that

tourists gather from e-WOM become the influential factors that affect tourists' decision-making in choosing Langkawi as their holiday destination. This finding has given better input to MOTAC, LADA and business providers in planning and positioning Langkawi as one of the top destinations in Malaysia. By emphasising and concentrating on the personality of Langkawi, it can attract the right tourists to visit Langkawi. It is recommended for future research to conduct a survey with similar percentages of local and international tourists for a fairer result. Moreover, it is also suggested to explore this study through a comparative study to better understand the factors involved in choosing a destination.

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