Tourism Destination Competitiveness and Tourism Performance in Middle-Income Countries

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Abstract
Tourism has become a significant socio-economic force in middle-income countries (MICs). The existing research lacks a comparative analysis of the tourism destination competitiveness (TDC) attributes between upper-middle-income countries (UMICs) and lower-middle-income countries (LMICs). This study aims to evaluate the destination competitiveness characteristics in MICs by empirically comparing LMICs' and UMICs' destination attributes. The study used a *quantitative descriptive* methodology with a cross-sectional secondary data sample from 67 MICs. The findings indicate that MICs are geographically located in six world regions, and each region is unique regarding tourist attractions. This study recognized five TDC determinants in the MICs context: core resources, supporting resources, destination management, tourism price, and environmental quality. The study findings revealed that UMICs have a comparative advantage over LMICs regarding TDC attributes. However, the LMICs group has a price advantage over the UMICs group. Tourism contribution to GDP in UMICs is almost five times more than in LMICs. The novelty of this research is the selection of developing countries on a global scale. The findings are of particular value to tourism researchers and policymakers in MICs. The findings help policymakers formulate effective destination management strategies and marketing plans for their tourism sector. Future research could improve the study's conclusions using recent post-pandemic data to explore the causal link between TDC determinants and tourism performance in MICs.

1 Introduction

Competitiveness is essential to the tourism industry (Tripon, 2018). Historically excluded from dominant tourism flows, Middle-income countries (MICs) have become crucial growth regions for tourism (Goffi et al., 2019). Middle-income countries (MICs) are home to 75 percent of the world's population, and MICs account for around one-third of global GDP and are major growth drivers (World Bank, 2019). As an industry, tourism has become a significant socio-economic force in emerging nations; a driver of economic development, it has made it indispensable for strategic planning efforts (Uysal et al., 2016). The Travel and Tourism (T&T) sector experienced 3.5 percent growth in 2019, exceeding that of the global economy (2.5%) for the ninth consecutive year (WTTC, 2020). Thus, tourism has emerged as a highly dynamic sector in absolute and relative terms (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999). Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented disruption to global travel and tourism. Recovery signs are encouraging but not simultaneous across all markets (Uppink & Soshkin, 2022). Thus, today's tourism industry faces crucial questions about improving destination competitiveness amid the post-pandemic realm (Shariffuddin et al., 2022; Xu & Au, 2023). Indeed, competitiveness has become a leading issue in destination management (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003), and competitive analysis of destinations is gaining importance in marketing planning and destinations' strategic positioning (Faulkner et al., 1999).

Extant literature indicates no universal list of TDC determinants and attributes (indicators) widely applicable to all destinations (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Hossain & Islam, 2019) and the relative significance of factors determining the TDC may not be the same within or across destinations (Michael et al., 2019)**.** Each destination has unique features that must be considered when assessing its competitiveness. Therefore, policymakers should consider their country's conditions and determine the most appropriate attributes and factors for applying tourism policies and managerial strategies. United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) predicts that tourism in MICs will grow twice as fast as in advanced economies or countries (Goffi et al., 2019). MICs have adopted tourism as a development strategy for poverty reduction and economic diversification (Ashley & Mitchell, 2009). However, tourism can be preserved or destroyed (Kruja et al., 2012). Therefore, achieving destination competitiveness, with its promise of prosperity for residents, is a central feature of the tourism policy debate (Knežević Cvelbar et al., 2016). Surprisingly, tourism literature has not given much attention to developing countries (Hosseini & Hosseini, 2021). Moreover, research does not compare TDC and tourism performance between upper-middle-income countries (UMICs) and lower-middle-income countries (LMICs). Therefore, such a study is necessary to fill the existing gap in research and provide insights into the tourism industry's potential growth and development.

This study aims to evaluate the destination competitiveness characteristics in MICs by empirically comparing the TDC attributes of LMICs and UMICs. The study used a *quantitative* methodology with a cross-sectional secondary data sample from 67 MICs. The study used descriptive analysis to compare the characteristics of Upper-Middle-Income Countries (UMICs) and Lower-Middle-Income Countries (LMICs). To achieve desired outcomes, policymakers and managers must understand TDC characteristics. The findings of this study can assist policymakers in formulating tourism strategies and enhancing destination competitiveness in MICs. This article is organized into five sections, wherein Section One gives an introduction along with the objective of this study. Section Two provides reviews of TDC literature. Section Three outlines the methodology, Section Four discusses the findings, and Section Five concludes by deliberating the implications, limitations, and future research issues.

2   Literature Review

Tourism acquired its global character with the introduction of trans-oceanic commercial flights in the decade of the 1950s (Pallavicini, 2017; Smith, 2004). Yet, between 2004 and 2013, tourism goods became income-inelastic in many middle-income countries (Rudež, 2018), reflecting that tourism has become a necessity rather than a luxury good in many developing countries. In the past 15 years, the number of foreign overnight tourists to developing countries has more than doubled (Goffi et al., 2019). Thus, tourism is a growing industry in not only developed countries but also developing and underdeveloped ones (Tasci & Knutson, 2004). The global development community and think tanks created indicators show that middle-income countries (MICs) or developing countries can achieve the same levels of performance as high-income countries (HICs) through their improved sectorial capacities (Asian Development Bank, 2016). However, middle-income countries (MICs) have yet to develop their tourism ability fully (Sanches-Pereira et al., 2017).

Meanwhile, Zurub et al. (2015) argued that the tourism industry is crucial for economic growth in developed economies as it relies on other sectors and creates a thriving economy and infrastructure. Likewise, global tourism flows nowadays reflect that developing economies have become tourism's most significant growth area. Similarly, Sofronov (2017) argued that the tourism industry is growing rapidly and has great prospects with the improvement of the economic level and the increase in people's demand for tourism. World Economic Forum (WEF) ranks the countries based on tourism competitiveness, and advanced countries regularly dominate the ranking (Wu et al., 2012). Remarkably, when comparing developed and developing countries, environmental, economic, and social factors impact tourism demand in developed and developing countries (Mazanec et al., 2007). Similarly, previous studies also suggested that countries' development status disparities affect the relationship between hosts and visitors and, consequently, the tourism industry's performance (Allen et al., 1988; Cárdenas-García et al., 2015).

Despite interest in TDC, current studies haven't resolved contradictions in selecting destination competitiveness determinants (Kozak & Baloglu, 2010; Ritchie & Crouch, 2010). The most commonly used determinant in the TDC literature is the core resources that can be divided into two categories: endowed (inherited) and created. Core resources and attractors are the attributes of a destination that attract and motivate tourists to visit a destination (Crouch, 2011; Dwyer et al., 2014; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Gomezelj & Mihalič, 2008; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Ritchie & Crouch, 2010). These include for examples natural sites, species, protected areas, cultural sites, intangible cultural heritage and sports stadiums (Assaf & Josiassen, 2012; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Filipović, 2018; Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019; Hassan, 2000; Krasojević & Đorđević, 2015; Murphy et al., 2000; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; WEF, 2019b). The following widely used determinant in the TDC literature is supporting resources. Supporting factors and services promote travel by adding value to the tourism experience (Dwyer et al., 2014). A destination's supporting facilities like transportation, safety and security, and e-tourism (use of ICT in tourism) services must co-exist with its core resources and attractions (Albalate & Bel, 2010; Khadaroo & Seetanah, 2007; Seetanah et al., 2011).

Destination management is those activities that "can enhance the appeal of the core resources and attractors, strengthen the quality and effectiveness of the supporting factors and resources"(Crouch & Ritchie, 1999, p. 149). Destination management activities cover destination marketing and branding, human resource development, destination policy, planning, and management (Dwyer & Kim, 2003). Destination marketing and brand development became powerful strategic tools due to the growing rivalry among destinations (Miličević et al., 2017). Classically, "economic theory assumes that quantity of demand for a product declines as the price of the product increases" (Ioannides & Debbage, 1998, p. 89). Generally, higher destination prices lead to lower international tourism, while lower prices result in more travel. Therefore, the competitiveness of a tourist destination is linked to travel motivations (Dwyer et al., 1999). Thus, price is essential in determining demand, reflecting a dimension of purchasing power. However, the price of international tourism is a complex construct (Ioannides & Debbage, 1998). It is defined by the cost of access to tourists in the form of ticket taxes and airport charges, purchasing power parity (PPP), hotel price, and fuel price (Assaf & Josiassen, 2012; Dwyer et al., 2014; Dwyer et al., 2000; Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019; Kayar & Kozak, 2010).

Environmental quality refers to "the quality of the natural features of the destination that human activities can deteriorate" (Mihalič, 2000, p. 66). Logically, visitors are heading away from polluted destinations; it is especially true where, for example, the perceived concern is the health risks from air pollution and water contamination (Middleton, 1997). Similarly, Crouch and Ritchie (1999) considered drinking water a crucial attribute of destination competitiveness. Likewise, Dwyer and Kim (2003) considered waste disposal to indicate destination competitiveness. Further, Assaf and Josiassen (2012) identified that CO2 emissions are mostly liable for air pollution, which is a negative determinant, and the stringency of environmental

regulation in the tourism industry is a positive determinant of tourism performance. Thus, air quality impacts tourism demand (Saenz-de-Miera & Rosselló, 2014; Zhang et al., 2020). Researchers have undertaken destination competitiveness studies to understand better how to enhance a destination's competitive advantage (Hudson et al., 2004; Mihalič, 2000), where destination competitiveness is related but not equal to destination performance. Meanwhile, Croes and Kubickova (2013) revealed an empirical causal relationship between TDC and tourism performance, which provides a new way of explaining the causal effect of competition on the economy of destinations.

3   Methodology

The World Bank identified income classification thresholds, dividing middle-income countries (MICs) into upper-middle-income and lower-middle-income economies (World Bank, 2019). For the fiscal year 2019-2020, both groups comprise 104 economies or countries worldwide (World Bank, 2020). From them, only 67 World Bank member countries were selected for analysis based on data available in the 2019 Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report (TTCR) and other sources, the World Bank (WB) database, and the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) report. TTCR is a flagship product of the World Economic Forum (WEF). It offers a global tourism performance index named the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI), which is "the most popular tool to rank countries in terms of their tourism performance"(Croes & Kubickova, 2013, p. 146).

The study nominated secondary data indicators to fit the suggested TDC attributes. Secondary data collection was deemed the most favourable option to achieve the purpose of this study and secondary data tends to be reliable and readily available (Dolata et al., 2015; Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019; Tripon, 2018; Vartanian, 2010). Thus, this study employed secondary data from numerous international sources, including the WEF, World Bank, WTTC, etc., and there is no question about the accuracy of their data. Data from secondary sources are mostly hard data, i.e., indexes, percentages, numbers, etc. and partly in the form of soft data, i.e., Likert scale measurements from 1 to 7.

The study suggests five determinants of TDC for MICs: core resources, supporting resources, destination management, tourism price, and environmental quality. The majority of the TDC attributes or indicators were adopted from the 2019 TTCR (WEF, 2019b), which provides a broad range of indicators from 67 middle-income countries (MICs) for evaluating TDC. Each construct or determinant was operationalized based on a thorough review of the TDC literature and consisted of the related variables. The variables were selected based on a few fundamental principles of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which focused on the importance, methodological soundness, and data accessibility (Nardo et al., 2005). Tourism performance construct considers indicators like international tourist arrivals, international tourism receipts, and tourism contribution to GDP (Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019; Perez Leon et al., 2022). Next, the data screening procedure was followed to check

that the data were not missing and that the data was entered correctly. The indicator for CO_2 emissions under environmental quality construct was taken out of the dataset, as suggested by Hair Jr et al. (2021), because it had 20 missing values and shaped biased group observations. Based on their importance in describing the proposed construct, a total of 31 indicators were selected for further analysis.

4 Findings

4.1 Income Group and Population of Middle-income Countries (MICs)

This section provides a general overview of the MICs. The Income Group classification of MICs is based on the World Bank Country classifications by Income Level (2019-2020), which are determined by the Gross National Income (GNI) per capita. The demographic characteristics of the MICs are discussed, followed by information on the number of countries for which tourism data is available for further analysis. Table 1 presents the income group and population statistics to provide a descriptive profile of the MICs.

Table 1: Income level and Population of the MICs

Income Group*	Population (In Thousand)
Lower-middle Income	3,330,652.55 (42.91)
Upper-middle Income	2,522,452.39 (32.49)
MICs Total	5,853,104.94 (75.41)
World Total	7,761,620.15

Source: World Bank 2020 (https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL)

Under the MICs income group, 30 are lower-middle-income, and 37 are upper-middle-income countries. Approximately 6 billion people are living within MICs. LMICs comprised 42.91% of the world's population, and UMICs consisting 32.49 % of the world's population. Thus, MICs are home to over 75% of the world's population. At the same time, MICs represent about one-third of global GDP and are major engines of global growth.

4.2 Regional Classifications of Middle-Income Countries (MICs)

Table 2 below lists the Middle-Income Countries (MICs) analyzed in this study. A total of 67 MICs were identified from seven World Bank regional classifications, based on data availability. These countries are located in different regions, such as East Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa, as shown in Figure 1. However, North America had no country listed as middle-income by World Bank regional classifications. Further discussion on these regions is given below.

Table 2: Region wise Middle-income Countries (MICs)

No.	East Asia and Pacific (EAP)	Europe and Central Asia	Latin America and the Caribbean	Middle East and North Africa	North America	South Asia	Sub-Saharan Africa
1.	Cambodia	Kyrgyz Republic	Bolivia	Egypt	-	Bangladesh	Angola
2.	China	Moldova	El Salvador	Morocco	-	India	Cameroon
3.	Indonesia	Ukraine	Honduras	Tunisia	-	Pakistan	Côte d'Ivoire
4.	Lao PDR	Albania	Nicaragua	Algeria	-	Sri Lanka	Eswatini
5.	Malaysia	Armenia	Argentina	Iran	-	-	Ghana
6.	Mongolia	Azerbaijan	Brazil	Jordan	-	-	Kenya
7.	Philippines	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Colombia	Lebanon	-	-	Lesotho
8.	Thailand	Bulgaria	Costa Rica	-	-	-	Nigeria
9.	Vietnam	Georgia	Dominican Republic	-	-	-	Senegal
10.	-	Kazakhstan	Ecuador	-	-	-	Zambia
11.	-	Montenegro	Guatemala	-	-	-	Zimbabwe
12.	-	North Macedonia	Jamaica	-	-	-	Botswana
13.	-	Russian Federation	Mexico	-	-	-	Namibia
14.	-	Serbia	Paraguay	-	-	-	South Africa
15.	-	Turkey	Peru	-	-	-	Mauritius
16.	-	Romania	Venezuela	-	-	-	-
Total	09	16	16	7	00	04	15

Notes: World Bank regional classifications are taken into consideration.

4.2.1 East Asia and Pacific (EAP)

East Asia and Pacific (EAP) is a region with a population of over 2.1 billion (World Bank, 2022f). Few regions in the world are as diverse as East Asia and the Pacific. East Asia, particularly the Chinese civilization, is considered one of the earliest origins of civilization. This vibrant area is also known for its significant diversity in terms of its people, cultures, environments, economies, political systems, and potential. It encompasses some of the world's fastest-growing economies (UNICEF, 2022). Based on the availability of international tourism data, 09 countries from Europe and Central Asia were chosen for analysis.

4.2.2 Europe and Central Asia (ECA)

Europe and Central Asia are regions with populations of over 923 million (World Bank, 2022a). The region includes the largest country in the world, the Russian Federation, and the largest landlocked country, Kazakhstan. The area is also known for

the presence of some of the most iconic large mammals, such as the Siberian Tiger, Snow, and Persian Leopards, Polar Bear, European Bison, Saiga Antelope, Argali Sheep, Orca, and Beluga Whale. Many other species of global importance occur in the region (IUCN, 2022). Based on the availability of international tourism data, 16 countries from Europe and Central Asia (ECA) were chosen for analysis.

4.2.3   *Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC)*

Latin America and the Caribbean have a population of approximately 652.35 million (World Bank, 2022b). Tourism plays a crucial role in the economy of Latin America. In 2017, Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean welcomed 112.9 million international tourists together, making up 53.5% of all international tourists who visited the Americas. This generated US$94.9 billion in international tourism receipts (Camargo et al., 2020). Latin America and the Caribbean have a great opportunity for green growth. With only 8% of global GHG emissions, the region has "green comparative advantages" that can create new industries and exports. Renewable electricity sources like solar, wind, and geothermal and abundant natural resources such as water, trees, and biodiversity provide potential for new industries (World Bank, 2022g). Based on the availability of international tourism data, 16 countries from Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) were chosen for analysis.

4.2.4   *Middle East and North Africa (MENA)*

Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a region with a population of over 464.54 million (World Bank, 2022c). While cultural heritage remains the primary tourism asset for the region, new types of tourism are emerging in the Arabian Gulf region, including luxury real estate, shopping, medical tourism, cruises, and transit tourism. The expatriate workforce creates a dual socio-economic system in several countries, which is segregated from the citizenry (Timothy, 2018). Oil-rich MIC countries like Iran, Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, and Jordan are also part of this region (ThoughtCo., 2019). Based on the availability of international tourism data, 07 countries from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) were chosen for analysis.

4.2.5   *South Asia*

South Asia is the southern region of Asia, defined in geographical and ethno-cultural terms. South Asia is an area with a population of approximately 1.86 billion **(**World Bank, 2022d**).**Topographically, it is dominated by the Indian Plate and defined largely by the Indian Ocean on the south and the Himalayas, Karakoram, and Pamir mountains on the north. Western, Central, East, and Southeast Asia bound south Asia. South Asia possesses many valuable tourism resources and attractions, which could be important vehicles for reducing the widespread, persistent poverty in South Asia (Rasul & Manandhar, 2009). In 2019, South Asia was ranked as "the most improved region since 2017" by the World Economic Forum's Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (WEF,

2019b). India has made significant progress in its rank, moving from 40th to 34th among the top 25% of countries between 2017 and 2019. Based on the availability of international tourism data, only 04 countries from South Asia were chosen for analysis.

4.2.6   Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa has a population of approximately 1.14 billion **(**World Bank, 2022e**).** Sub-Saharan Africa has significant tourism potential but faces multiple institutional, economic, and socio-economic challenges. The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) predicts that the region's direct travel and tourism GDP will expand by 60% between 2018 and 2029. As a result, the sector plays a critical role in the region's development. However, to maximize future gains, regional economies must improve their competitiveness. The 2019 Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report suggests that the region can leverage its natural resources and focus on improving connectivity to increase its competitiveness (WEF, 2019b).

Sub-Saharan Africa has almost 17% of UNESCO World Heritage Natural sites and nearly 15% more known species than other regions. However, it's the world's least competitive region for travel and tourism, with only Mauritius, South Africa, and Seychelles ranking high in the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI). This creates a significant gap between the region's overall TTCI and natural resource scores (WEF, 2019a). Based on the availability of international tourism data, only 15 countries from Sub-Saharan Africa were chosen for analysis.
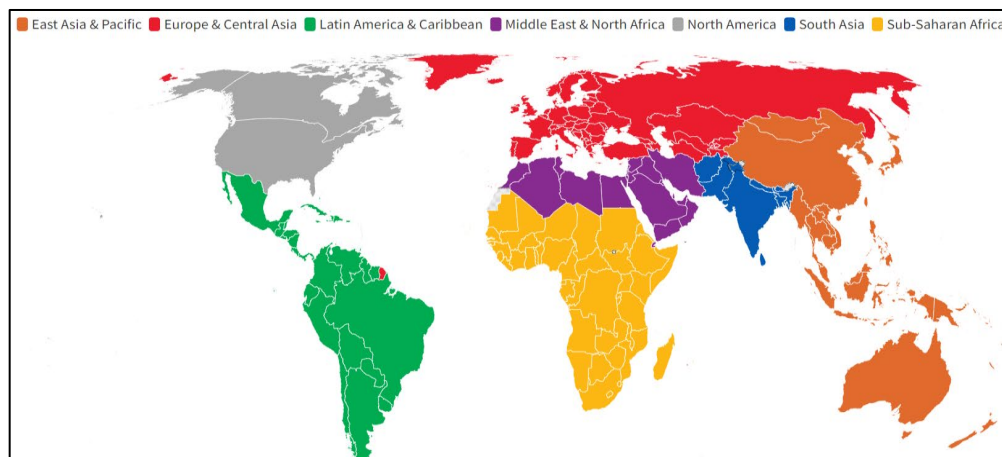

Figure 1: The world by Region
Source: World Bank

4.3 Determinants and Indicators of TDC

The determinants and indicators were identified based on the literature review and the context of the MICs. Thus, this study recognized five TDC determinants in the MICs context. These are (1) core resources, (2) supporting resources, (3) destination

management, (4) tourism price, and (5) environmental quality. The indicators were selected to reasonably fit the suggested TDC constructs (determinants) in the MICs context. This finding is consistent with previous researchers' findings and studies (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). The following analysis provides information on the characteristics of tourism in MICs and highlights potential relationships between variables.

4.3.1   Core Resources Construct

Core resources are a destination's attributes that attract and motivate tourists to visit a destination (Dwyer et al., 2014; Gomezelj & Mihalič, 2008; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). These include natural sites, species, protected areas, cultural sites, intangible cultural heritage and sports stadiums. Similarly, Go and Govers (2000) considered maintaining and developing these resources essential for destination competitiveness. Table 3 lists the indicators for the core resources construct.

Table 3: Core Resources Indicators

Income Group	Number of World Heritage natural sites	Total known species	Total protected areas (in square km)	Number of World Heritage cultural sites	Oral and intangible cultural heritage expressions	Number of large sports stadiums	Number of international association meetings
Lower-middle Income	40	29320	338.22	117.5	113	225	570.73
Upper-middle Income	83	37849	437.61	242.5	209	556	2326.08

Source: The Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report (TTCR) 2019

Most of the World Heritage Sites are major cultural tourism attractions and icons of national identity (Li et al., 2008). From the above table, it is evident that the upper-middle income country group is well ahead of the lower-middle income group in terms of every indicator of core resources construct. The distribution of the UNESCO number of world heritage natural sites between lower-middle Income (40) and upper-middle Income country groups (83) is highly skewed.

4.3.2   Supporting Resources Construct

A destination with enough core resources and attractors but lacking supporting factors and resources will find it very challenging to grow its tourism industry (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Thus, the core resources and attractors must co-exist with a destination's supporting facilities like transportation, safety and security, and use of ICT in tourism services (Albalate & Bel, 2010; Khadaroo & Seetanah, 2007; Seetanah et al., 2011).

Supporting resources constructed include the indicators of reliability of police services, transport facilities including air, road and rail infrastructure, tourism infrastructure, and utilization of ICT in tourism. Table 4 presents the indicators of tourism supporting resources.

Table 4: Supporting Resources Indicators

Income Group	Index for reliability of police services [1 = not at all, 7 = to a great extent]	Index for quality of air transport infra [1 = extremely underdeveloped; 7 = extensive and efficient]	Index for quality of roads [1 = extremely underdeveloped; 7 = extensive and efficient]	Index for quality of railroad infra [1 = extremely underdeveloped; 7 = extensive and efficient]	Index for quality of tourism infra [1 = very poor; 7 = excellent]	Index for ICT use for B2B [1 = not at all, 7 = to a great extent]	Index for internet use for B2C [1 = not at all, 7 = to a great extent]	Index for quality of port infra [1 = extremely underdeveloped; 7 = extensive and efficient]
Lower-middle Income	3.93	3.97	3.54	2.83	4.27	4.33	4.24	3.40
Upper-middle Income	3.95	4.48	3.81	3.03	4.66	4.54	4.50	3.91

Source: The Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report (TTCR) 2019

From the above table, it was evident that the upper-middle income country group is well ahead of the lower-middle income group in terms of every indicator under the supporting resources construct. Therefore, results revealed that countries lower-middle-income are far behind upper-middle-income countries regarding tourism-supporting resources. However, the quality of air transport infrastructure (3.97) and railroad infrastructure (2.83) for the low-income group is much inferior to upper-income groups.

4.3.3   Destination Management Construct

Hassan (2000) argued that destination management should comprehensively analyze distinct comparative advantages that offer a specific long-term appeal to the target travel customer segments to preserve tourism competitiveness. Further, Kotler et al. (2017) argued that the products of a destination and its brand are significant success determinants as they can be used as tools to express the unique identity of a destination. Subsequently, the destination management construct includes variables treatments of customers, the effectiveness of marketing and branding to attract tourists, government prioritization of the T&T industry, staff training and ease of finding skilled employees. Table 5 below reveals that the upper-middle income group has superior destination management than the lower-middle income group.

Table 5: Destination Management Indicators

Income Group	Index of treatment of customers [1 = poor; 7 = extremely well]	Index for effectiveness of marketing and branding to attract tourists [1 = not effective at all, 7 = extremely effective]	Index for government prioritization of the T&T industry [1 = not a priority at all, 7 = a top priority]	Index for extent of staff training [1 = not at all, 7 = to a great extent]	Index for ease of finding skilled employees [1 = not at all, 7 = to a great extent]
Lower-middle Income	4.289343	4.025871	4.556913	3.749622	3.932119
Upper-middle Income	4.511719	4.429416	4.838441	3.822587	3.986873

Source: The Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report (TTCR) 2019

4.3.4 Tourism Price Construct

The price competitiveness of a tourist destination is linked to travel motivations (Dwyer et al., 1999). Thus, price is essential in determining demand, reflecting a dimension of purchasing power. However, the price of international tourism is a complex construct (Ioannides & Debbage, 1998). It is defined by the cost of access to tourists through ticket taxes and airport charges, purchasing power parity (PPP), hotel price, and fuel price (Kayar & Kozak, 2010). Table 6 presents the four indicators of tourism price construct.

Table 6: Tourism Price Indicators

Income Group	Ticket taxes and airport charges [Index of the relative cost of access (ticket taxes and airport charges) to international air transport services (0 = highest cost, 100 = lowest cost)]	Hotel and restaurant price index [world average = 100, (Greater values indicate higher prices)	Purchasing power parity [Ratio of purchasing power parity (PPP) conversion factor to official exchange rate (USD)]	Fuel price levels [Retail diesel fuel prices expressed as US cents per litre]
Lower-middle Income	77.7978012	50.745333	0.379761	75.16667
Upper-middle Income	79.73365792	72.774096	0.450781	74.30811

Source: The Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report (TTCR) 2019

Table 6 shows that the lower middle-income group has a price advantage over the upper-middle-income group in the case of every indicator of tourism price construct except fuel price. The average diesel fuel price per litre (75.16) in the lower-middle income group is higher than the upper-middle income group (74.30).

4.3.5 Environmental Quality Construct

The importance of environmental quality in providing a sustainable tourism destination has been discussed vastly by tourism scholars (Hassan, 2000; Mihalič, 2000). Tourists' understanding of the destination's potential based on experience in providing a healthy environment for tourists is associated with the image and competitiveness of the destination (Hall & Page, 2014). The environmental quality construct includes indicators like particulate matter (2.5) concentration (a measure of air pollution), renewable energy consumption, use of essential drinking water and use of basic sanitation (Assaker et al., 2014; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Mihalič, 2013; WEF, 2019b). Table 7 presents the four indicators of environmental quality construct.

Table 7: Environmental Quality Indicators

Income Group	Particulate matter (2.5) air pollution, mean annual exposure (micrograms per cubic meter)	Use of essential drinking water services (% of Population)	Renewable energy consumption (% of total final energy consumption)	Use of essential sanitation services (% of Population)
Lower-middle Income	1067.61	83.19503	39.85278997	65.66066
Upper-middle Income	838.4369	96.09581	21.13667841	89.95491

Source: World Bank (2019).

Table 7 above revealed that the upper-middle income group has a superior environmental quality to the lower-middle income group regarding air quality and basic drinking water and sanitation services. However, in the case of renewable energy consumption, lower-middle income countries' average consumption (39.85) is higher than upper-middle-income countries' consumption (21.13).

4.3.6 Tourism Performance Construct

Tourism performance is multidimensional (Sainaghi et al., 2013). This viewpoint reflects a destination can be competitive only if it can turn factors into tourism income (Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019). The tourism performance construct includes indicators, for example, international tourist arrivals, receipts, and GDP contributions. Table 8 shows that tourism contributes to GDP in upper-middle-income countries (US 2538302.4 million) almost five times more than in lower-middle-income countries (US 522327.5 million). It is also noticeable that the distribution of the number of international tourist arrivals and tourism receipts between the two groups is highly skewed.

Table 8: Tourism Performance Indicators

Income Group	International Tourist Arrivals (Millions) in 2019	International Tourism Receipts (US Millions) in 2019	Tourism Contribution to GDP (US Million) in 2019
Lower-middle Income	159.032	124323.6	522327.5
Upper-middle Income	550.186	311641.9	2538302.4

Source: World Bank (2020) and WTTC Report (2021)

5   Study Implications

The world's Middle Income Countries (MICs) are diverse groups by population and income level. The MICs are geographically located in different regions of the world, namely East Asia and Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Middle East and North Africa, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. In North America, there was no country listed as middle-income by World Bank regional classifications. It has been observed that each region has its uniqueness that can attract tourists to visit the area or destination. For example, East Asia, especially Chinese civilization, is regarded as one of the earliest cradles of civilization. Europe and Central Asia region include the largest country in the world, the Russian Federation, and the largest landlocked country in the world, Kazakhstan. Latin America and the Caribbean have enormous opportunities for green growth; these regions contribute to only 8% of global GHG emissions and have huge "green comparative advantages" that offer new industries and export opportunities. While cultural heritage remains the primary tourism asset for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region as a whole, many new types of tourism are emerging, especially in the Arabian Gulf region, where hyper-development is closely associated with the increasingly prominent role of luxury real estate and shopping, retail, medical tourism, cruises, and transit tourism. Similarly, South Asia possesses many valuable tourist resources and attractions like the Taj Mahal, Sundarbans, and Cox's Bazar**.** Likewise, Sub-Saharan Africa has tremendous potential for nature-based tourism.

The findings indicate that UMICs and LMICs possess abundant natural resources for tourism. However, both groups face significant challenges due to structural, institutional, economic, and socio-economic factors. Indeed, both LMICs and UMICs face their separate challenges. Despite these challenges, tourism still plays a vital role in middle-income countries' economies. Therefore, Middle-income countries must improve their tourism competitiveness to reap future benefits. Based on the literature review, this study recognized five TDC determinants in the MICs context, including core resources, supporting resources, destination management, tourism price, and environmental quality. The findings revealed that UMICs have a comparative advantage over LMICs regarding TDC attributes under each construct. However, the lower-middle-income group has a price advantage over the upper-middle-income group. Tourism

contribution to GDP in upper-middle-income countries is almost five times more than in lower-middle-income countries. It is also noticeable that the distribution of the number of international tourist arrivals and tourism receipts between the two groups is highly skewed. Thus, the study's findings disclose that LMICs lag behind UMICs regarding tourism performance.

The findings of this study have significant policy implications, mainly for middle-income countries (MICs) and the global tourism industry as a whole. Understanding the differences and similarities in TDC attributes between UMICs and LMICs is crucial for informed destination management and marketing decisions. Identifying a destination's uniqueness allows marketers to design tourism products that attract tourists, and integrating these elements into the destination's branding process will help to build brand equity. For example, the Latin American and Caribbean regions possess "green comparative advantages," making them excellent opportunities for environmentally friendly tourism activities, commonly known as green tourism. These destinations can easily attract and satisfy environmentally conscious tourists by offering environmentally friendly tourist services. Similarly, it is worth mentioning that the LMICs group has a price advantage over the UMICs group, which indicates that policymakers of LMICs can reap the benefits of price advantage while designing destination marketing and branding strategies for destinations.

Moreover, many MICs have adopted tourism as a poverty reduction and economic diversification development strategy. Therefore, policymakers of MICs need timely and reliable information on their TDC attributes and tourism performance. Thus, the study findings will help policymakers in middle-income countries make informed policy decisions and address challenges ahead in the tourism sector. Further, the study findings are expected to help policymakers formulate effective destination management strategies and marketing plans for their tourism sector.

6   Conclusion

The novelty of this research is the selection of MICs on a global scale. The study findings offer significant implications for researchers and policymakers in MICs where achieving TDC is a concern. To the authors' knowledge, no study has conducted a comparative analysis of the TDC attributes and tourism performance between UMICs and LMICs. Therefore, this study filled this research gap and provided insights into middle-income countries' TDC characteristics. Thus, the study contributes new knowledge to TDC literature by providing information on the previously unknown destination attributes of UMICs and LMICs. Understanding a destination's comparative advantage is crucial to its competitiveness in today's ever-changing tourism landscape. By leveraging unique strengths, a destination can offer an unparalleled experience to visitors, creating an enduring identity in the fiercely contested tourism market. The findings of this study describe the competitiveness attributes of the MICs and their performance in the tourism industry.

While the results are attention-grabbing in light of a new context in MICs, a few possible study limitations must be acknowledged. First, the small population (104 MICs) and international tourism data unavailability limit the sample size. Another issue is the cross-sectional data used, mainly from 2019. Recent tourism performance data, such as 2020 and 2021, were not considered due to the COVID-19 pandemic phase that almost restricted international tourism flow. Future research could improve the study's findings using recent post-pandemic data to explore the causal link between TDC determinants and tourism performance in MICs.

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