

Tourism Destination Competitiveness from Stakeholders' Perspectives: Influences and Evidence from Uttarakhand

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Introduction:

In recent tourism literature, researchers have introduced concepts and relevant models about tourism destination competitiveness (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Evan & Johnson, 1995; Hassan, 2000; Kozak, 2001; Ritchie & Crouch, 1993; Thomas & Long, 2000). Most of these studies have focused on how effectively and efficiently destination competitiveness can be improved to respond to escalating market competition. It has been also discussed that creating or integrating value-added destination products and services is a basic step in enhancing tourism attractiveness. Accordingly, understanding the driving forces of success as well as developing suitable competitive strategies is of fundamental importance to improve regional or national destination competitiveness.

Particularly, Heath, and Wall (1992) noted that the distinctive quality or conditions of tourism attractions and resources in a given region provide an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of regional tourism resources. Subsequently, evaluation or identification of a distinctive competence in a specific region provides a clear foundation and direction for the tourism planning process. In the tourism-planning context, tourism attractions and resources have been considered as a function of successful supply factors in achieving destination or organizations' objectives. Additionally, tourism attractions such as competitive forces or resources have been evaluated and categorized in various ways so that supply components can effectively match the diverse tourism market demands (Gunn, 1988; Inkeeps, 1991; Lew, 1987).

The most common evaluation method of tourism attractiveness is from visitors' or tourists' perspectives. It has been argued that this approach is somewhat limited due to the short period of visiting time, and a limited knowledge of or familiarity with attractions existing in a given region (Formica, 2000; Milman & Pizam, 1995). Thus, Liu (1988) and Formica (2000)

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suggested that rather than using visitors' perspectives, the use of tourism experts such as tourism stakeholders have potential benefits and advantages.

Their solid knowledge and experiences of the entire portfolio of existing tourism resources and attractions is useful in evaluating destination attractiveness and competitive resources. The professional planning involvement and experiences, long-term community observations, and interactions with tourists are also reliable sources of assessing tourism attractiveness and resources. Particularly, tourism stakeholders' evaluations can help to discover community tourism products more appropriately. Thus, the amalgam of tourism attractions and resources that a community wishes to present to the tourism market can be identified (Getz, 1987).

However, even though studies on destination communities' perceptions, attitudes, and behavior in tourism planning and involvement have been conducted from various perspectives, the dynamic and complex natures of the factors of destination communities, especially, tourism stakeholders' opinions about tourism development preferences and competitive strategies have not been clearly addressed yet.

Research Methodology

Research Question 1: Are tourism stakeholders' development preferences about tourism attractions/resources affected by:

- 1) Perceived tourism impacts
- 2) Environmental attitudes, and/or
- 3) Perceived place attachment

Research Question 2: Is there a relationship between tourism stakeholders' development preferences about tourism attractions/resources and their support of enhancement strategies for destination competitiveness?

Research Hypotheses

Based on the research questions, four hypotheses were proposed and a structural model was tested to determine how tourism stakeholders' development preferences about tourism attractions/resources affect their support for destination competitive strategies, and also how these tourism stakeholders' development preferences are affected by three constructs,

including perceived tourism impacts, attitude toward environmental concerns, and perceived place attachment. Thus, the four hypotheses follow:

H1: There is a positive relationship between tourism stakeholders' perceptions of the benefits of tourism impacts and preferences about tourism attractions/resources development.

H2: There is a positive relationship between tourism stakeholders' environmental attitudes and preferences about tourism attractions/resources development.

H3: There is a positive relationship between tourism stakeholders' place attachment and preferences about tourism attractions/resources development.

H4: There is a positive relationship between tourism stakeholders' preferences about tourism attractions/resources development and support for the enhancement strategies of destination competitiveness.

Research findings and discussion

H1: There is a positive relationship between tourism stakeholders' perception of the benefits of tourism impacts and preferences about tourism attractions/resources development. The result of SEM analysis indicated that the path from the construct of tourism development impacts and the construct of tourism attraction development was significant and positive (t -value = 5.53, $p < .05$). This result supported that if tourism stakeholders positively perceive tourism development impacts, they would prefer to develop tourism attractions/resources.

Specifically, if tourism stakeholders more strongly agreed that tourism has created jobs, attracted investment, has encouraged a variety of cultural activities, and has resulted in more cultural exchange and identity to the community, they would support the development of small independent businesses (e.g. gift shops, prearranged attractive and flexible tour packages, guide services, and campgrounds), cultural and folk events. (e.g. concerts, arts and crafts, dances, festivals), and information for tourists. In fact, this finding was consistent with the findings of previous studies. Researchers have demonstrated that if people receive benefits from tourism development such as job creation, economic gain, cultural exchange, and cultural identity, they would support tourism development (Jurowski, Uysal, & Williams, 1997; Perdue, Allen, & Long, 1987; Yoon, Gursoy, & Chen, 2001)

H2: There is a relationship between tourism stakeholders' environmental attitudes and preferences about tourism attractions/resources development.

Hypothesis 2 investigated the relationship between tourism stakeholders' environmental attitudes and preferences about tourism attractions/resources development. However, the result of SEM analysis did not support hypothesis 2, having a t-value of -.032, which was not statistically significant at the level of .05.

This finding suggested that tourism stakeholders' environmental attitudes did not affect their preferences about tourism attractions/resources development. More specifically, this study indicated that tourism stakeholders' ecocentric attitudes did not lead to their preferences or support for tourism attraction development.

H3: There is a positive relationship between tourism stakeholders' place attachment and preferences about tourism attractions/resources development. In hypothesis 3, it was postulated that tourism stakeholders who are more attached to the community are more likely to prefer to develop tourism attractions/ resources. The result of SEM analysis supported this hypothesis, having a positive relationship between the constructs (t-value = 2.73, p < .05). Accordingly, this finding suggested that if tourism stakeholders are more strongly attached to their community, they would have a greater preference for developing tourism attractions/ resources such as small independent businesses, cultural and folk events, and information for tourists. Additionally, since the place attachment construct was successfully measured by four observed indicators that were related to place identity, it can be argued that tourism stakeholders who have more emotional/symbolic place attachment are more likely to support tourism attractions/resources development.

H4: There is a positive relationship between tourism stakeholders' preferences about tourism attractions/resources development and support for the enhancement strategies of destination competitiveness. Hypothesis 4 investigated the relationship between development preferences about tourism attractions/resources and support for destination competitive strategy. Support for destination competitive strategy was measured by marketing efforts and activities, and destination management organizations' roles. The structural coefficient and t-values associated with these two constructs were positively significant (t-value = 7.12, p < .05). Accordingly, hypothesis 4 was supported. This finding indicated that the greater tourism

stakeholders' preferences for tourism attractions/resources development in terms of small independent businesses, cultural and folk events, and information for tourists, the more they support destination competitive strategies. Particularly, they are more likely to support marketing efforts and activities and management organizations' role in order to enhance destination competitiveness.

Finally, the results of the structural equation model analysis found that there was an additional significant relationship between tourism development impacts and support for destination competitive strategy ($\text{Gamma } \gamma_{21}$), which was not hypothesized to be tested in this study.

Research Implication

it can be implied that if tourism stakeholders perceive more positive tourism development impacts in terms of economic and cultural aspects, they are likely to support destination competitive strategies such as marketing efforts and activities and management organizations' role in enhancing tourism destination competitiveness.

The first research question was: Are tourism stakeholders' development preferences about tourism attractions/resources affected by perceived tourism impacts, environmental attitudes, and/or perceived place attachment? This research question was divided into three hypotheses: H1: There is a positive relationship between tourism stakeholders' perceptions of the benefits of tourism impacts and preferences about tourism attractions/resources development; H2: There is a positive relationship between tourism stakeholders' environmental attitudes and preferences about tourism attractions/resources development; and H3: There is a positive relationship between tourism stakeholders' place attachment and preferences about tourism attractions/resources development.

The findings of the structural analysis supported hypotheses 1 and 3 that there is a positive relationship between tourism stakeholders' perceptions of tourism development impacts and preferences about tourism attractions/resources development. Additionally, there is a positive relationship between tourism stakeholders' place attachment and preferences about tourism attractions/resources development. However, this study did not support hypothesis 2, that

there is a positive relationship between tourism stakeholders' environmental attitudes and preferences about tourism attractions/resources development. Accordingly, this structural analysis concluded that tourism stakeholders' preferences about tourism attractions/resources development are a function of perceived tourism development impacts as well as place attachment. As previous research discussed Jurowski, 1994; Jurowski, Uysal, & Williams, 1997; Perdue, Long, & Allen, 1987; Yoon, Gursoy, & Chen, 2000) if people perceive more benefits than costs from tourism development, they are more likely to support future tourism development.

Specifically, rather than the environmental and physical benefits from tourism development discussed in other studies (Davis, Allen, & Cosenza, 1988; Getz, 1994; Lankford & Howard, 1994), this study demonstrated that the more tourism stakeholders perceive economic and cultural benefits from tourism development, the more they are likely to support future tourism attractions/resources. For example, positive perceptions in terms of job creation and investment, and cultural exchange and identity make tourism stakeholders support more tourism attraction development. Those attractions they preferred to develop were small independent business and cultural and folk events such as gift shops, prearranged attractive, flexible tour packages, guide services, campgrounds, concerts, arts and crafts, dances, and festivals. And also, they supported information for tourists to attract more tourists to their communities. These results may be due to the abundant tourism attractions/resources related to heritage and cultural destinations that exist in the research site (Uttarakhand). People in the research site may have received more economic benefits from the above attractions/resources. These tourism attractions/ resources may have created and sustained employees, as well as attracted more investment, so that tourism may have brought economic benefits to stakeholders' communities.

As another finding that should be acknowledged in this study, tourism stakeholders who have expressed more emotional/symbolic attachment to their communities, are more likely to prefer tourism attractions/ resources development. This result indicated that place attachment may be a critical determinant of peoples' supporting tourism development, as other previous studies have discussed (McCool & Martin, 1994; Um & Crompton, 1987; Williams, McDonal, Riden, & Uysal, 1995; Yoon, 1998). This finding also supported the general argument of place attachment that people may be an integral component of place or

destination environments and their values and perceptions of the natural and environmental settings surrounding their communities could be evaluated and incorporated into the destination management process. The second research question was: Is there a relationship between tourism stakeholders' development preferences about tourism attractions/resources and their support of enhancement strategies for destination competitiveness? This research question was addressed by hypothesis 4. The findings of the analysis for hypothesis 4 indicated that there is a positive relationship between tourism stakeholders' preferences about tourism attractions/resources development and support for enhancement strategies for destination competitiveness. Again, the tourism attractions/resources that tourism stakeholders in this study preferred to develop were small independent businesses, cultural and folk events, and information for tourists. The more their preference for developing tourism attractions, the more likely they were to support destination competitive strategies such as marketing efforts and activities, and destination management organizations' role. Accordingly, this finding implied that this relationship could represent the best combinations or matches between tourism attractions and destination competitive strategies in order to enhance destination competitiveness. These combinations may produce more and a better quality of tourism attractions/resources that are marketed effectively or efficiently to current and potential tourists. As Hassan (2000) discussed, destination competitiveness is the ability of a destination to create and integrate value-added products and sustain its resources while maintaining market position. Marketing efforts and activities could help to create and sustain the product value of tourism attractions/resources. Competitiveness can be enhanced through incorporating marketing planning and strategies (Bordas, 1994; Buhalis, 2000; Kozak, 2001; Heath & Wall, 1992; Poon, 1994; Ritchie & Crouch, 2000).

This finding indicated that destination organizations' role and function in tourism destinations should not be overlooked in terms of its responsibility to the well-being of all aspects of destination management. Ritchie and Crouch (1993) also discussed that a carefully selected and well-executed program of destination management can serve to improve destination competitiveness. A broad range of activities and roles might be incorporated, according to the tourism attractions/resources they prefer to develop. Consequently, as Crouch and Ritchie (1999) discussed, it should be noted that destination management activities and programs could enhance the appeal of core tourism attractions/ resources, strengthen the quality and effectiveness of the resources, and adjust certain constraints that

tourism attractions have in terms of location, safety, and cost. In conducting post hoc testing of the structural equation model of tourism destination competitiveness, an additional relationship that was not hypothesized was found, and indicated that tourism stakeholders' perceived tourism development impacts directly influenced their support for destination competitive strategies. Reasonably, as similar to other studies (Perdue, Long, & Allen, 1990; Yoon et al., 2000), if people perceive benefits from tourism development, they are willing to support future tourism development. In this case, tourism stakeholders who have perceived benefits from tourism development, particularly in its economic and cultural aspects, are likely to support enhancement strategies for destination competitiveness.

Limitation and future studies

This study investigated the structural relationships of tourism destination competitiveness from tourism stakeholders' perspectives. The surveyed data were only collected in the state of Uttrakhand. This geographically limited survey may produce different results and conclusions in terms of the magnitude and directions of relationships among the constructs studied in this research. Tourism stakeholders in other states and countries may have different perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors concerning tourism development and destination competitive strategies. Other geographic boundaries and research scopes should be explored to see if similar findings and results could be addressed. And also, future research may collect data from other competitive states and countries so that comparison studies can be conducted.

This study has been somewhat limited in its selection of observed indicators, variables, and constructs. Even if those observed indicators, variables, and constructs were selected based on the literature review and researcher's observations, other critical variables and constructs may exist to achieve further insights of destination competitiveness. For example, more specific variables and constructs that address international competitive strategies are limited. The various variables and constructs that are related to tourism information systems or management information systems were abbreviated. In current tourism markets, any tourism destination may need to pay more attention to advanced technologies and techniques so that quality products and services are delivered effectively and efficiently. Therefore, future studies may address destination competitiveness that includes information technology and techniques such as tourism information systems

Another critical limitation to this study is related to the respondents. Generally, in the tourism literature, tourism stakeholders may include residents, tourists, and tourism experts such as people who are involved in organizations, associations, destination management and attractions such as the respondents for this study. However, this study did not include residents' and tourists' opinions of destination competitive strategies. Accordingly, compared with the respondents (tourism stakeholders) surveyed in this study, residents and tourists may express different perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors concerning the issues and topics presented in this study.

As a result, for more comprehensive and thorough investigations of destination competitive strategies supported by all tourism stakeholders, future research is recommended to include both residents and tourists. Conducting studies that include comparisons and differences between/among tourism stakeholders in terms of destination competitive strategies may be possible

This study also is somewhat limited in terms of longitudinal characteristics, which would make it possible to analyze the potential time-lag for the hypothesized relationships and structural model. This is due to the fact that the data were collected for a two-month period (June and July, 2012). Each measurement scale for the constructs can be refined and validated. This study might reflect ongoing transformations that could influence the relationships between the constructs for future research. Moreover, a longitudinal analysis of the structural model of tourism destination competitiveness may reveal what competitive strategies do a better job in increasing destination competitiveness and performance.

Due to the fact that this study did not include any performance and satisfaction variables to see what and how much destination competitive strategies work for the current tourism market, future research should address this limitation to suggest more appropriate destination competitive strategies to the tourism industry. Consequently, the above-mentioned limitations should be considered as essential and critical suggestions for future research. Future studies should take into account these limitations to produce more complete research results.

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