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Navigating External Tourism Forces: A Study on Destination Competitiveness and Sustainability



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Abstract

This study examines the influence of external tourism forces on destination competitiveness and sustainability within the tourism sector. Building upon prior research on tourism resilience, this study applies an integrated model that considers political, market-related, technological, tourism policy and socio-economic conditions. There is a significant research gap in understanding how external tourism forces affect a destination's competitiveness and sustainability. Most studies examine these forces in isolation, resulting in a fragmented understanding of their interactions and effects on a destination's strategies and operations. Using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM), data from a diverse sample of 512 tourism stakeholders were analysed. Results indicate that political stability, market positioning, technological integration and robust tourism policies are significant drivers of competitive and sustainable tourism. Findings highlight that tourism policy and technological conditions are crucial for sustainability, while political and socio-economic stability are essential for competitive tourism appeal. This research contributes to the literature by providing a nuanced understanding of how distinct external tourism forces interact to shape destination resilience. Practical recommendations underscore the value of multi-stakeholder collaborations to enhance both competitiveness and sustainability in dynamic tourism environments. The study's model offers adaptable strategies for policymakers and industry leaders to bolster destination resilience against evolving global challenges.

Keywords

Competitiveness • Destination • Sustainability • Stability • Tourism



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Navigating External Tourism Forces: A Study on Destination Competitiveness and Sustainability

The global tourism sector has emerged as a significant driver of economic growth, leading to infrastructural advancements, job creation and cultural exchange (Alam, Alam & Kalam, 2022). Furthermore, tourism has been instrumental in promoting global peace by effectively addressing challenges such as conflict, globalisation, migration and poverty (Baloch, Shah, Iqbal, Sheeraz, Asadullah, Mahar & Khan, 2023; Shepherd, 2022). The sector has experienced a notable transformation, marked by the advent of a "new tourism" paradigm driven by technological advancements, changing consumer preferences, and sector deregulation (Rahmiati, Ismail, Amin, Simatupang, Larson & Othman, 2019). However, the rapid expansion of tourism has raised concerns regarding its environmental and social impact, necessitating a shift towards a more sustainable approach to tourism development (Sutarman, Rahardja, Oganda, Millah & Azizah, 2023).

The comprehensive integration of sustainable development into the public policies governing tourism holds significant importance due to its catalytic role in sustainable development and destination competitiveness (Streimikiene, Svagzdiene, Jasinskas & Simanavicius, 2021). By incorporating sustainable practices, the tourism sector can strengthen its competitiveness, aligning with the growing consumer demand for environmentally conscious and socially responsible travel options (Dias, Viana & Pereira, 2024). Efforts should be directed towards generating a high multiplier effect and fostering long-term private-sector investment through policy initiatives (Rasool, Maqbool & Tarique, 2021). It is crucial to acknowledge that the rapid proliferation of tourism in less affluent areas carries the potential to induce shifts in social norms and contribute to the emergence of larger societal issues (Alamineh, Hussein, Endaweke & Taddesse, 2023).

The global tourism sector is undeniably grappling with a myriad of challenges that revolve around maintaining the sustainability and competitive edge of tourist destinations. Soh, Puah and Arip (2023) argue that there is an increased focus on sustainability. However, research on integrating sustainability with competitiveness in tourism research is still limited. Seguí-Amortegui, Clemente-Almendros, Medina and Grueso-Gala (2019) advocate a more comprehensive approach to tourism studies. They note that many existing studies lack depth, particularly in terms of methodology and real-world applications. These authors advise that future research should prioritise sustainable infrastructure, livelihoods and tourism management. Moreover, external tourism forces such as the ever-changing political landscape, market dynamics, technological advancements and socio-economic conditions profoundly influence the sector (Reivan-Ortiz, Cong, Wong, Ali, Thu & Akhter, 2023). The authors acknowledge that studies on destination competitiveness and sustainability exist. However, these focus predominantly on internal factors such as attractions, recreational facilities, events, history and culture (Ayoub & Mohamed, 2024; Ngondo, Hermann, & Venter, 2024; Ntshangase, Ezeuduiji & Ayanwale, 2024).

There is a significant research gap in understanding the influence of external tourism forces on a destination's ability to remain competitive and sustainable. Most studies approach these external forces in isolation (Gössling & Hall, 2021; Kock et al., 2019), resulting in a fragmented understanding of how political, technological, and economic disruptions interact with internal destination attributes to influence long-term competitiveness and sustainability (Dwyer & Edwards, 2022). Few studies explicitly address how global megatrends such as digital transformation, socio-political polarisation and climate volatility interact with tourism systems. Dwyer and Edwards (2022) advocate for forward-looking competitiveness model that inte-

grates these externalities, arguing that such integration is critical to anticipating destination vulnerabilities and building strategic resilience. As a result, there is a critical gap in understanding how destinations can strategically respond to external disruptions while maintaining both sustainability and competitiveness. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how multiple external forces influence the sustainability and competitiveness of tourist destinations. By exploring how multiple external forces simultaneously influence sustainability and competitiveness, this study offers actionable insights for policymakers, planners and private-sector actors. It proposes an integrative model that moves beyond isolated factor analysis to support more resilient, adaptive and future-oriented tourism strategies aligned with global uncertainties.

Theoretical Underpinning

This study is anchored in Systems Theory, Stakeholder Theory, and the Resource-Based View to examine how external tourism forces shape destination competitiveness and sustainability.

Systems Theory conceptualises tourism destinations as open systems composed of interdependent subsystems: political, market, technological, and socio-economic that continuously interact with their environment (von Bertalanffy, 1968). Disruptions in one area, such as political instability or technological change, can ripple through the entire system and influence both sustainability and competitiveness (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2004).

Stakeholder Theory complements this view by recognising that tourism outcomes are shaped by diverse actors, including governments, businesses, communities, and tourists. Sustainable and competitive destination management depends on engaging and balancing these stakeholder interests through inclusive governance and participatory decision-making (Freeman, 1984; Waligo, Clarke, & Hawkins, 2013).

The Resource-Based View (RBV) explains how internal capabilities such as digital infrastructure, skilled labour, and institutional frameworks function as strategic assets that enable destinations to respond effectively to external pressures. These VRIN resources (valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable) underpin long-term competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984; Peteraf, 1993). In this study, variables like technological conditions and tourism policy are seen not only as contextual factors but also as internal resources contributing to destination resilience (Zhang, Song, & Huang, 2009). Together, these theories offer a multi-dimensional framework: Systems Theory captures interdependence, Stakeholder Theory foregrounds inclusive governance, and RBV underscores the strategic value of internal resources in dynamic tourism environments

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

A country's tourism sector is susceptible to various external forces that can either impede or promote its competitiveness and sustainability. These forces have been identified as political conditions, market-related conditions, technological conditions, tourism policy development and socio-economic conditions (Ferreira & Perks, 2020; Fernández, Martínez & Martín, 2022).

Political Conditions

Research indicates that unfavourable political conditions in a country or region can have harmful effects on the tourism sector. Studies by Ottuh (2020), Plank, Gomes, Caldas, Varelaand, Ferreira (2023) and Seabra, Reis and Abrantes (2020) have highlighted the significant influence of unfavourable political conditions, such as political turmoil, on the decline in bookings and an increase in trip cancellations to tourist destinations, affected by such circumstances. This indicates that favourable political conditions play a crucial role in



shaping the attractiveness of tourist destinations and influencing travellers' decisions. The principal risk associated with political instability pertains to the compromised safety and security for potential tourists, ultimately decreasing the competitiveness of the destination (Tomczewska-Popowycz & Quirini-Popławski, 2021). The presence of xenophobia and tribalism in a country can reduce its competitiveness in the global tourism market (Ferreira & Menzies, 2024; Kock, Josiassen & Assaf, 2019; Matiza, 2023). Terrorism, war and geopolitical tension are known to have a negative influence on the competitiveness and sustainability of a country's tourism sector (Seabra et al., 2020). Closely related to terror attacks and war is the political governance of specific countries. Dictatorships and countries with authoritarian governance have an inhibiting effect on tourism demand (Aksoy, Carter & Wright, 2012). Thus, engaging actively in international peace organisations is important as it helps nations build strong partnerships, foster open communication develop effective conflict resolution strategies. Additionally, it supports the establishment of transparent and accountable governance systems, contributing to the long-term stability and prosperity of a nation (Manhas, Singh, Sharma & Faheem, 2023). Based on this discussion, the following hypotheses were developed.

H1: Political conditions have a positive statistically significant relationship with competitive tourism.

H2: Political conditions have a positive statistically significant relationship with sustainable tourism.

Market-related Conditions

The term market-related conditions refers to the unique attributes and dynamics of a specific country's marketplace, particularly in the context of tourism (Zhou, 2022). Changes in currency exchange rates can greatly affect the tourism sector. Currency fluctuations can influence the cost of travel for tourists, resulting in a decline in demand (Reivan-Ortiz et al., 2023). In addition, Opstad, Hammervold and Idso (2021) postulate that a strong local currency makes travelling expensive for tourists coming from countries with weaker currencies. Also, competitive pricing of tourism products and services is important as it enhances the attractiveness of the destination (Rheeders, 2022). Furthermore, tourism products and services should be perceived as providing value for money and of good quality (Mwawaza, Kariuki & Ndubi, 2022), as this can assist in the sustainability of the tourism sector and increase repeat visitation (Väisänen, Uusitalo & Rynnänen, 2023). Mikulić, Vizek, Stojčić, Payne, Čeh Časni and Barbić (2021) indicate that tourism can influence housing prices in areas affected by over-tourism. Cró and Martins' (2022) findings indicate that tourism activity affects housing affordability, revealing that intensified tourism can make it harder for local residents to afford housing. Seasonal tourism can have a particularly strong negative impact, leading to employment fluctuations and economic instability in affected areas (Zvaigzne, Litavniece & Dembovska, 2022). Tourist destinations should establish peaceful and diplomatic relationships with their neighbouring countries. This can help facilitate cross-border tourism collaboration, increasing the variety of products on offer and the value of travel (Kozak & Buhalis, 2019). Tourist destinations need to identify their market position in order to ensure successful performance evaluations and long-term sustainability (Lou, 2018). Staying updated with the evolving needs of consumers is crucial for countries to remain competitive (González-Rodríguez, Díaz-Fernández & Pulido-Pavón, 2023). Based on this discussion, the following hypotheses were developed.

H3: Market-related conditions have a positive statistically significant relationship with competitive tourism.

H4: Market-related conditions have a positive statistically significant relationship with sustainable tourism.

Technological Conditions

The tourism sector has experienced a significant transformation due to the advancements in technology. The widespread availability of smart devices and travel applications has had a profound impact on how tourists access and experience travel (Ramlavat, 2023). Notably, scholars such as Gössling (2021) emphasise the pivotal role that digital technology plays in promoting sustainable and competitive tourism in popular destinations. Tandafatu, Ermilinda and Darkel (2024) also stress the significance of digital transformation across various sectors of the tourism sector, with the aim of enhancing the overall experience for both tourists and the organisations involved. The integration of digital technology into the tourism sector has brought forth a multitude of advantages, such as multimedia technology, augmented reality, destination-specific travel applications and high-speed internet connectivity facilitated by fibre optic connections (Lee, Chen, Wu & Xing, 2021; Tandafatu et al., 2024). Moreover, strategic alliances between tourism organisations have proven beneficial for consumers, enabling seamless interactions between different entities and providing access to a broader range of products and services (Moliner-Velázquez, Fuentes-Blasco & Gil-Saura, 2022). International travel agents have formed partnerships with local agencies to develop specialised package deals tailored to specific needs, such as language preferences or physical challenges (Berenguer-Contrí, Gallarza, Ruiz-Molina & Gil-Saura, 2020). The technological preparedness of a country has been underscored as crucial for the long-term sustainability and global competitiveness of its tourism sector (El Archi, Benbba, Kabil & Dávid, 2023; Sustacha, Baños-Pino & Del Valle, 2023). Overall, it is evident that digital technology has not only reshaped the way tourism operates but also has the potential to drive further advancements in the sector. The literature discussed forms the basis for the development of subsequent hypotheses.

H5: Technological conditions have a positive statistically significant relationship with competitive tourism.

H6: Technological conditions have a positive statistically significant relationship with sustainable tourism.

Tourism Policy

The discourse surrounding a tourism policy has underscored the pivotal role it plays in managing and fostering tourism growth while simultaneously striving for competitive advantage and integrating sustainable development practices (Khan, Khan, Lim, Tan & Ahmed, 2021). Furthermore, the formulation of tourism policies necessitates a nuanced approach tailored to the specificity of the tourist destination, emphasising its unique characteristics (Ke, 2024). To bolster competitiveness, it is imperative to facilitate the expansion of travel exports through the negotiation of bilateral agreements with other nations (Garidzirai, 2022). Notably, infusing tourism planning into the comprehensive analysis and development of a locale's resources is indispensable for fortifying its competitiveness (Ke, 2024). Governments must acknowledge the enduring investment potential within the tourism sector, as it contributes profoundly to the attainment of sustainable economic, social and environmental objectives (Bhuiyan, Zhang, Xuan, Rahman & Khare, 2023). The implementation of appropriate land-use measures emerges as a linchpin for sustainable tourism development, as inadequate land utilisation may precipitate environmental challenges (Baloch et al., 2023). Ineffectual industrial waste management systems have the potential to adversely impact both tourists and the local community (Koliotasi, Abeliotis & Tsartas, 2023). Furthermore, the role of environmental education cannot be overstated in creating awareness about environmental issues and equipping individuals with the requisite

skills to address these concerns (Väisänen et al., 2023). Notably, climate change and global warming exert considerable influence over the interaction between the tourism sector and the environment. Therefore, the implementation of improved sustainable environmental protection mechanisms is imperative to prevent the overexploitation of natural resources (Baloch et al., 2023). Building upon this discussion, the following hypotheses have been developed.

H7: Tourism policy has a positive statistically significant relationship with competitive tourism.

H8: Tourism policy has a positive statistically significant relationship with sustainable tourism.

Socio-economic Conditions

The impact of tourism on the socio-economic development of various countries and regions has been significant for many years (Nugraha & Flora, 2022). Tourism has the potential to not only drive business growth and create employment opportunities but also to catalyse the development of supporting industries such as infrastructure, transportation and food and beverage services, thereby creating positive synergies for regional development (International Labour Organisation, 2022). Khan et al. (2021) profess that tourism can play a crucial role in alleviating poverty, particularly in underdeveloped areas. Additionally, it can serve as a platform for the promotion and preservation of local culture and art, facilitating cultural exchange and understanding between host communities and visitors (Siswahto & Muryani, 2020). However, the influx of tourists can also lead to the commercialisation and commodification of cultural practices, potentially eroding the authenticity and meaning of cultural traditions (Tang & Xu, 2023). The behaviour of tourists and their insensitivity to local customs, traditions and standards can significantly impact the local community, potentially resulting in a decline in local traditions and beliefs and leading to undesirable behaviours such as gambling, alcohol and drug consumption, promiscuity and crime (Sarr, Manuel & De León, 2020). Moreover, the tourism sector is often associated with issues such as low pay, long working hours, high staff turnover, lack of social protection and gender discrimination (International Labour Organisation, 2022). These factors can contribute to social and labour unrest, which can, in turn, harm the destination's reputation and decrease tourist arrivals (Shahrabani, Teitler-Regev, Desivilya-Syna, Tsoukatos, Ambrosio, Correia-Loureiro & Voulgaris, 2020). Therefore, it is imperative to implement sustainable tourism practices to mitigate these negative effects and ensure the long-term sustainability of the tourism sector (Liu & Chamaratana, 2024). The complex and multidimensional nature of tourism's socio-economic effects necessitates careful management to maximise the benefits and minimise the drawbacks for host communities and the tourism sector as a whole (Agarwal, Isha, Grappa, Akaremsetty & Shekhar, 2023). This discussion has led to the development of the following hypotheses.

H9: Socioeconomic conditions have a positive statistically significant relationship with competitive tourism.

H10: Socioeconomic conditions have a positive, statistically significant relationship with sustainable tourism.

Competitive and Sustainable Tourism

Traditional studies often treat competitiveness and sustainability as separate domains. However, competitiveness in tourism is increasingly linked to sustainable practices, as destinations that fail to address environmental, social and economic sustainability risk losing their appeal over time (Camisón, 2019; Seguí-Amortegui et al., 2019). Mazilu, Niță, Drăguleasa and Mititelu-Ionuș (2023) profess that for the tourism

sector to truly prosper, it should encapsulate elements of tourism competitiveness and sustainability. With increasing competitiveness in the sector, tourism operators are compelled to embrace innovative strategies to maintain relevance and achieve success (Ilieva, Petrova & Todorova, 2023). According to Dias et al. (2024), the competitiveness of tourism is typically linked to three crucial factors: comparative advantage or price competitiveness, the strategic and management perspective, and the integration of new technologies. The comparative advantage in tourism is influenced by disparities in physical, human and capital endowments, as well as factors such as technological development, exchange rates, government policy, competition and the influence of multinational corporations. Notably, the growing emphasis on sustainability represents a key driver of competitive tourism (Manrai, Manrai & Friedeborn, 2020). Sustainable tourism aims to harmonise the economic benefits of tourism with the imperative to safeguard the environment and support local communities, recognising that tourism can have adverse environmental impacts while also holding the potential to alleviate poverty and empower communities (Baloch et al., 2023). Furthermore, for destinations to remain competitive, they should welcome tourists regardless of their race, nationality, religion, sexual orientation and gender identity (Digital Tourism Think Tank, 2024). Achieving competitive and sustainable tourism necessitates a collaborative approach involving the tourism sector, governments and local communities (Pranita, Sarjana & Musthofa, 2022). Governments play a pivotal role in fostering a supportive policy environment, investing in sustainable infrastructure, and ensuring the equitable distribution of tourism benefits (Bhuiyan et al., 2023). Conversely, the tourism sector can advance sustainable development by embracing eco-friendly practices, promoting local culture and heritage, and empowering local communities (Pranita et al., 2022). Destinations capable of effectively managing the environmental, socio-cultural and economic impacts of tourism while delivering a top-tier visitor experience are better positioned to thrive in the competitive tourism landscape (Baloch et al., 2023). This discussion has created the following hypothesis.

H11: Sustainable tourism has a positive statistically significant relationship with competitive tourism.

Methodology

Measurement Instrument, Data Collection and Sample Size

It was deemed necessary to develop a new measuring instrument based on the existing literature, as no other measuring instrument was available to achieve the objectives of this study. A five-point Likert scale ranging from utmost importance (1) to unimportant (5) was used to measure the respondents' perceptions of carefully structured constructs and items. The study employed a comprehensive self-administered online survey for data collection, targeting all stakeholders in South Africa's tourism sector. This inclusive approach encompassed private and public tourism organisations as well as domestic and international tourists. To ensure a diverse and representative sample, judgement and snowball non-probability sampling methods were used. Various public and private tourism organisations in South Africa were approached to share the survey link with their staff and customers. The survey link was also disseminated on South African tourism-related Facebook pages, with participants encouraged to share the link with their contacts who met the criteria for completion. This meticulous process resulted in 512 completed responses. The total sample exceeded the sample size estimation set by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), indicating that a sample of 384 is required if the study's population is more than 1,000,000. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University's Faculty Ethics Research Committee–Human (ethics number H-16-BES-BMA-021) to ensure that the research was conducted ethically and followed established ethical principles. Participants provided informed and voluntary consent, and their confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. The respondents were also informed to withdraw from the survey without any consequence.

Statistical Methods

Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) has garnered recognition as a robust technique for examining relationships among diverse variables and their corresponding indicators (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt & Ringle, 2019). The flexibility offered by PLS-SEM in modelling complex structures and formative constructs leads to a reduction in the unexplained variance in the proposed model, which is not the case with covariance-based structural equation modelling (CB-SEM) (Guenther, Guenther, Ringle, Zaefarian & Cartwright, 2023; Hair, 2021). As a result, PLS-SEM's capability to estimate highly complex models with multiple latent variables and indicators allows researchers to capture the intricate relationships that define the tourism sector. This capability is particularly necessary in comprehending the multifaceted nature of the tourism sector, where factors such as destination image, service quality and tourist satisfaction interact to shape overall tourism experiences and outcomes, as is the case in this study (Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar, Kock & Ramayah, 2015). PLS-SEM was considered best suited to this study due to its exploratory nature and the complexity of the model, which had five independent variables and two dependent variables. PLS-SEM takes a different approach to model fit assessment. Unlike traditional SEM approaches, the focus shifts from the necessity of rigorous model fit evaluation to examine the structural relationships within the model rather than on the overall model fit (Heikal, Rialialie, Rivelino & Supriyono, 2021). Therefore, this paper does not explore the topic of model fit but underscores the significance of examining the structural relationships within the model.

The PLS-SEM statistical analysis was conducted on the collected data using SMARTPLS 4 (version 4.1.0.3) software. According to Hair et al. (2019), SMARTPLS provides various options for model estimation for both reflective and formative measurement models. The initial stage of the SLP-SEM process involved defining the connections between the latent variables and their respective indicators to create the conceptual model. Once the conceptual model was established, the data were prepared for analysis. This process involved addressing the missing values and confirming the normality assumptions. Following data preparation, the model parameters were estimated using the PLS-SEM algorithm (Liengaard, 2024). The algorithm iteratively computes the outer weights and the inner model loadings. The assessment of the measurement model focuses on ensuring the reliability and validity of the latent constructs, which includes evaluating the inner loadings, composite reliability and average variance extracted (AVE) to establish the convergent validity and internal consistency of the measurement model, as outlined by Hair, Heikal, Hult, Ringle, Sarstedt, Danks and Ray (2021) and Sarstedt, Ringle, Smith, Reams and Hair (2014). The model was further tested to establish discriminant validity by examining the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). Finally, the data underwent bootstrapping to estimate parameter confidence intervals and subsample estimates, which were then used for significance testing, resulting in path coefficients, t-values and p-values to evaluate hypothesis testing according to Becker, Cheah, Gholamzade, Ringle and Sarstedt (2023). The specific threshold or cut-off points for the statistical analysis will be further discussed in the results and analysis section.

Results and Analysis

This section will be exhibited in the following manner. First, the respondents' profile will be presented. Then, the measurement model was assessed in terms of validity and reliability. Lastly, the structural model will be assessed, and the results of the hypothesis testing will be presented.

Respondents' Profile

The study analysed the data from 512 respondents; of these, 73 percent were South African citizens, while 27 percent were foreign citizens. Females represented sixty-three percent of the respondents, and only 37 percent were male. The most dominant age group, representing thirty percent, was between the ages of 46 and 55. The second largest group, representing 24 percent, was in the age category of 26 to 35. Only five percent were older than 66 years. Seventy-three percent of the respondents were not employed in the tourism sector, while sixteen percent were employed at private tourism organisations and 11 percent in public organisations.

Measurement Model

The measurement model was assessed in terms of validity and reliability. According to Aybek and Karakas (2022), reflective models should be assessed for convergent validity, internal consistency, and discriminate validity. To assess the convergent validity, the outer loadings and the AVE must be examined. To prove internal consistency, composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha values need to be assessed and to prove discriminate validity, the HTMT ratios need to be calculated. Table 1 presents the results for assessing the convergent validity and internal consistency.

Table 1
Convergent Validity and Internal Consistency Results

Constructs	Outer loading	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
<i>Political Conditions (CP)</i>		0.812	0.875	0.638
PC1	0.748			
PC2	0.786			
PC3	0.795			
PC4	0.862			
<i>Market Conditions (MC)</i>		0.786	0.862	0.610
MC1	0.799			
MC2	0.746			
MC3	0.827			
MC4	0.748			
<i>Technological Conditions (TC)</i>		0.901	0.923	0.667
TC1	0.811			
TC2	0.827			
TC3	0.813			
TC4	0.830			
TC5	0.811			
TC6	0.809			
<i>Tourism Policy (TP)</i>		0.922	0.935	0.617
TP1	0.786			
TP2	0.796			
TP3	0.790			
TP4	0.724			

Constructs	Outer loading	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
TP5	0.802			
TP6	0.710			
TP7	0.803			
TP8	0.807			
TP9	0.844			
Socioeconomic Conditions (SC)		0.747	0.854	0.661
SC1	0.848			
SC2	0.824			
SC3	0.765			
Competitive Tourism (CT)		0.856	0.903	0.700
CT1	0.837			
CT2	0.849			
CT3	0.851			
CT4	0.807			
Sustainable Tourism (ST)		0.740	0.835	0.559
ST1	0.743			
ST2	0.788			
ST3	0.729			
ST4	0.730			

Researchers' own construction

According to Astuti (2021), outer loadings of 0.7 or higher are considered highly satisfactory. The outer loadings of items MC5, MC6, ST5, TC7, TC8, and TP10 were below the 0.7 threshold and thus excluded from further analysis. The loadings of the retained items varied between 0.710 and 0.862. All extracted AVE values exceeded the 0.5 cut-off as recommended by Hair et al. (2019). Based on these results, convergent validity has been proven. Hair et al. (2019) indicate that for reflective measurement models, Cronbach's alpha and CR values must be between 0.70 and 0.94, as this indicates the reliability of the measurement model. However, Sarstedt et al. (2014) warned that a Cronbach's alpha and CR value of 0.95 or higher may compromise content validity due to indicator redundancy. As per Table 1, all values are in the parameters set by Hair et al. (2019) and Sarstedt et al. (2014), thus proving the internal consistency of the measurement model. To assess discriminate validity, HTMT ratios were calculated and are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Discriminate Validity Using the HTMT Ratios

	CT	MC	PC	SC	ST	TC	TP
CT							
MC	0.541						
PC	0.622	0.653					
SC	0.612	0.738	0.768				
ST	0.660	0.701	0.525	0.556			
TC	0.560	0.724	0.631	0.667	0.671		
TP	0.621	0.687	0.561	0.682	0.717	0.643	

CT	MC	PC	SC	ST	TC	TP
Researchers' own construction						

Rönkkö and Cho (2020) highlight the importance of establishing a cut-off value for the HTMT ratio below 0.85 for satisfactory discriminant validity. As can be seen from Table 2, all the HTMT ratios were below the 0.85 threshold, thus providing adequate proof of the measurement model's discriminate validity. The assessment of the structural model is presented in the subsequent section.

Structural Model Assessment

To evaluate the structural model, nonparametric bootstrapping was utilised with 5,000 subsample estimates. Ensuring that the structural model is free of collinearity issues, the VIF values were assessed following Hair et al.'s (2019) guidelines, which indicate that these values should be below 3. As shown in Table 3, all VIF values were below the threshold, indicating no collinearity issues and allowing for hypothesis testing. The hypotheses were assessed by reviewing the p-value for statistical significance ($p < 0.05$) and examining the path coefficient strength (Lienggaard, 2024). The strength of the path coefficient was interpreted based on the following criteria: values equal to and below 0.15 were considered weak, 0.16 - 0.35 were considered moderate and values exceeding 0.35 were considered strong (Aybek & Karakas, 2022). The results of the structural model are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3

Structural Model Results

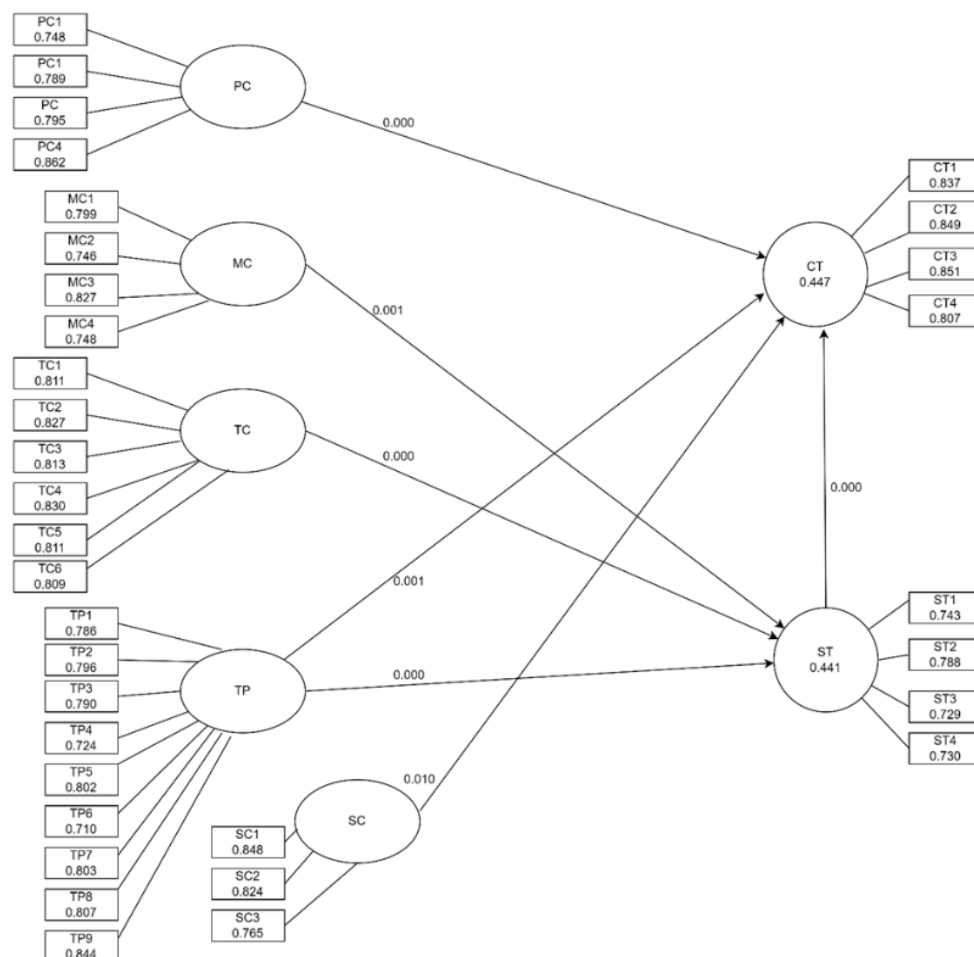
Hypothesis	Relationship	VIF	Path Coefficient	T-value	P-value	Result
H1	PC → CT	2060	0.234	4.477	0.000*	Accept
H2	PC → ST	2011	0.040	0.803	0.422	Reject
H3	MC → CT	1797	-0.039	0.643	0.520	Reject
H4	MC → ST	1794	0.166	3.246	0.001*	Accept
H5	TC → CT	2040	0.072	1.519	0.129	Reject
H6	TC → ST	2039	0.215	3.535	0.000*	Accept
H7	TP → CT	1793	0.201	3.428	0.001*	Accept
H8	TP → ST	2106	0.373	6.126	0.000*	Accept
H9	SC → CT	2023	0.106	2.213	0.010**	Accept
H10	SC → ST	2182	-0.017	0.290	0.772	Reject
H11	ST → CT	1933	0.259	4.662	0.000*	Accept

* $p \leq 0.001$ ** $p \leq 0.05$

As per Table 3, the results indicate that political conditions ($\beta = 0.234$, $t = 4.477$, $p = 0.000$) have a moderate positive statistically significant relationship with competitive tourism; thus, H1 is accepted. Political conditions ($\beta = 0.040$, $t = 0.803$, $p = 0.422$) have an insignificant relationship with sustainable tourism and therefore H2 is rejected. Market conditions ($\beta = -0.039$, $t = 0.643$, $p = 0.520$) have a negative non-significant relationship with competitive tourism, and consequently, H3 is rejected. Market conditions ($\beta = 0.166$, $t = 3.246$, $p = 0.001$) have a moderate positive statistically significant relationship with sustainable tourism, and subsequently, H4 is accepted. Technological conditions ($\beta = 0.072$, $t = 1.519$, $p = 0.129$) have an insignificant relationship with competitive tourism; thus, H5 is rejected. However, technological conditions ($\beta = 0.215$, $t = 3.535$, $p = 0.000$) have a moderate positive statistically significant relationship with sustainable tourism; therefore, H6 is accepted.

Tourism policy ($\beta=0.201$, $t=3.428$, $p=0.001$) has a moderate positive statistically significant relationship with competitive tourism, and consequently, H7 is accepted. In addition, tourism policy ($\beta=0.373$, $t=6.126$, $p=0.000$) has a strong positive statistically significant relationship with sustainable tourism, and accordingly, H8 is accepted. Socio-economic conditions ($\beta=0.106$, $t=2.213$, $p=0.010$) have a moderate positive statistically significant relationship with competitive tourism; thus, H9 is accepted. Socio-economic conditions ($\beta=-0.017$, $t=0.229$, $p=0.772$) have a negative insignificant relationship with sustainable tourism and thus, H10 is rejected. As per Table 3, the results for H11 ($\beta=0.259$, $t=4.662$, $p=0.000$) indicate that there is a moderate positive statistical significance relationship between the dependent variables sustainable tourism and competitive tourism, and the hypothesis is therefore accepted. An explanatory power assessment was conducted to assess the R2 value. Competitive tourism and sustainable tourism had R2 values of 0.447 and 0.441, respectively (see Figure 1). This indicates moderate predictive power (Chin, 1998).

Figure 1
Structural Model



Source: Researchers' own construction

Discussion and Recommendations

The study reveals that political conditions (H1) exhibit a moderate statistically significant relationship with competitive tourism. According to research by Ferreira and Perks (2022), the competitiveness of a country's tourism sector can influence its political conditions. Highlighting the authority of governments,

Ingram, Paoline and Terrill (2013) cautioned that the presence of authority does not guarantee peaceful, democratic and diplomatic governance. The empirical findings indicate that in order for tourist destinations to achieve a competitive tourism sector, it is crucial to present the destination as peaceful and free from xenophobic violence. Furthermore, Seabra et al. (2020) contend that travellers' apprehensions about visiting destinations perceived as politically unstable and undergoing civil unrest, xenophobic violence and terrorism are on the rise. In order to promote a competitive tourism sector, the government should actively endorse the tourism sector, enhance political stability, address politically linked unrest such as xenophobic violence, and engage community and traditional leaders to create a safe tourism environment to attract potential tourists.

A moderately statistically significant relationship was observed between market conditions (H4) and sustainable tourism. A study by Baloch et al. (2023) directly associates market conditions with the destination sustainability. The findings of Baloch et al., (2023) indicate that to achieve sustainability, the nation must prioritise financial aspects, such as offering good value for money, high-quality tourism products, and upholding a stable exchange rate to entice more visitors. Woyo and Slabbert (2021) underscore the significance of providing competitive prices and valuable products to attract tourists. Furthermore, Imamboccus, Seetanah, Nunkoo and Jaffur (2024) caution against the adverse effects of exchange rate volatility on tourists planning to travel. Another consideration is that tourism activities must have a minimal impact on the cost of living for local residents, as highlighted by Mikulić et al. (2021). In addition, the social sustainability of tourist destinations relies on strong relations with neighbouring countries and being perceived as a neutral nation to bolster visitation, as indicated by Safaeimanesh and Jenkins (2021). For these reasons, tourism organisations should set sector-related prices for locally sourced products and services and provide superior service to promote good value for money and prevent price wars. Governments can promote sustainable tourism by positioning the destination as a visa-exempt location, exploring fiscal measures like progressive taxes, offering incentives for local hiring, and providing grants for tourism skills training programmes. These actions will prompt the re-visitation of tourists.

The study revealed a moderate statistically significant relationship between technological conditions (H6) and sustainable tourism. El Archiet et al. (2023) advocated integrating new technological developments from the global marketplace into local tourism businesses to support economic sustainability. Palacios-Florencio, Santos-Roldán, Berbel-Pineda and Castillo-Canalejo (2021) indicate that the tourism sector can stimulate technological change and innovation, thereby promoting sustainability. The research findings underscore the significance of managing artificially inflated product prices during peak seasons to attain economic sustainability in the tourism sector. Opstad et al. (2021) note that some destinations inflate prices during the peak tourist season to maximise revenue. To foster tourism sustainability, a viable approach could involve offering locally sourced products and services at reduced prices during off-peak seasons. Kim, Joun, Choe and Schroeder (2019) confirmed the importance of providing sustainable product offerings by implementing lower off-peak season prices. Skilled tourism labour is also deemed vital for ensuring tourism sustainability. Rotar, Gričar, and Bojnec (2023) highlight the influence of skilled tourism labour on the effectiveness of the country's tourism sector. Skills training can also mitigate the impact of service heterogeneity, particularly for front-line staff (Namin, Marnburg & Bakkevig-Dagsland, 2022). Tourist destinations should form alliances within the local tourism sector to enhance sustainability. These alliances can facilitate specialised package deals and accommodate specific tourist needs while enabling tourists to engage with multiple businesses through a single company. Thus, to support sustainable tourism, travel marketers should consider designing destination-specific mobile apps to provide real-time information so that past

and potential visitors can always get up-to-date information. They can also use multimedia technology and social media to showcase the destination based on reviews of past travellers to entice potential travellers to visit the destination and create virtual shop windows to immerse and engage with both potential and past travellers. To promote sustainable tourism, the government should strive to continuously improve internet connectivity at tourist destinations. This can be achieved by expanding fibre optic connections near tourist attractions and accommodations, providing complimentary Wi-Fi at airports, incentivising lodging and dining establishments to offer free Wi-Fi and encouraging the establishment of multimedia kiosks for tourists with Wi-Fi access. In addition, travel service providers should focus on implementing blockchain technology. This creates decentralised, immutable booking records that reduce the risk of fraud, double bookings and data manipulation

Tourism policy presented a moderate statistical relationship with competitive tourism (H7) and a strong statistical relationship with sustainable tourism (H8). According to Khan et al. (2021), sustainable tourism requires the commitment of all involved parties in developing a tourism policy. Furthermore, addressing rural poverty is crucial for sustainable tourism, as tourism income can be utilised to enhance infrastructure in these areas. Effective land use and forest preservation management are essential for environmentally sustainable tourism. As Baloch et al. (2023) highlighted, integrating appropriate land use measures into tourism development can mitigate the environmental challenges associated with under- or overuse of land, which may lead to unsustainable tourism. In addition, the empirical evidence indicates that implementing HIV/AIDS prevention strategies and establishing vagrant-free tourism areas are pivotal for socially sustainable tourism. According to Bah (2021), tourism development can trigger social issues such as child prostitution, teenage pregnancies and HIV/AIDS. The empirical findings also emphasise the significance of bilateral travel export agreements for tourism sustainability, as these agreements enhance tourists' mobility and ultimately improve the overall tourist experience, as noted in the literature (Garidzirai, 2022). In order to advance competitive and sustainable tourism, the government should engage rural communities in eco-friendly tourism to promote social responsibility tourism programmes and preserve natural resources. Safety in all tourist zones should be prioritised to ensure sustainable tourism growth.

Socio-economic conditions had a moderate statistical relationship with competitive tourism (H9). Marti and Puertas (2024) support this finding and indicated that socioeconomic conditions can enhance destination competitiveness. The literature review clearly shows that tourism can have both positive and negative socio-economic impacts on the destination regions. While it can drive economic growth, create job opportunities and preserve local cultures, it can also lead to commercialisation, social issues and labour unrest (Siswahto & Muryani, 2020). Therefore, it is important that the tourism sector involves the local communities in the tourism planning and decision-making processes to ensure that their voices are heard and their interests are represented. Destination marketing organisations (DMOs) should develop educational information programmes for tourists to raise awareness about their local customs, traditions and cultural sensitivities, to foster mutual respect and understanding while creating a learning experience by highlighting the destination's uniqueness. In addition, DMOs should develop and market diverse tourism offerings beyond mainstream attractions to rural areas to distribute economic benefits more equitably across the destination region. The tourism sector stakeholders must engage with each other and local communities in strategic initiatives to support competitive tourism. Online educational institutions should ensure that their tourism programmes meet international standards and include comprehensive training courses on customer service, tourism offerings, customer inquiries and travel technology to provide an excellent customer experience before and during visitation.

Sustainable tourism (H11) demonstrates a moderate statistically significant relationship with competitive tourism. This indicates that tourism stakeholders perceive an interrelationship between sustainable and competitive tourism. It is essential to acknowledge that achieving competitiveness in tourism is contingent on sustainability. For a destination to attain competitiveness in tourism development, it must embody sustainability not only in economic and ecological aspects but also socially, culturally and politically (Streimikiene et al., 2021). Nevertheless, this perspective overlooks the sustainable aspect of not exceeding the carrying capacity of a destination and preserving its environmental integrity (Streimikiene et al., 2021). Conversely, Baloch et al. (2023) contend that destinations experiencing the highest growth rates are those that devise strategies for the environmental sustainability of their tourism sector. Stakeholders of the tourism sector must adopt a comprehensive approach to resource management, considering the economic, social and environmental impacts of their decisions to ensure sustainability. Moreover, cultivating strong relationships with other economic sectors can bolster global competitiveness. The encouragement of ecotourism and the formation of public-private partnerships can address social inequalities and foster both sustainable and competitive tourism.

Theoretical Implications

This exploratory study developed and tested a competitive and sustainable tourism model from a visitor's viewpoint. The external environmental forces were identified through extant literature, and the theory related to each environmental force was used to develop the tested items. Researchers in developing and developed countries can apply this model by modifying it to align with their destination's environmental conditions. The validation of the model can thus occur by developing items associated with their political, economic, socio-economic and technological environmental conditions, as well as tourism policies. This will enable a distinctive, personalised, competitive and sustainable destination model for a specific destination, regardless of country or city. The study identified three crucial factors linked to competitiveness, namely the political and socio-economic environment and the tourism policy of a country. These factors must drive the development of the model items to be tested. Given the crucial role of technology, it must be used as a strategic tourism marketing strategy weapon for sustainability. Consideration should be given to incorporating data-driven technology to enable efficient marketing decision-making. Moreso, to be a sustainable destination, the market environment, especially exchange rates, must guide pricing strategies.

The link between competitive tourism nations and sustainable tourism must not be overlooked when designing tourism marketing strategies (Manrai et al., 2020). The purpose of sustainable tourism is to reap the economic benefits of tourism while safeguarding the environment and supporting local communities to alleviate poverty and empower them (Baloch et al., 2023). Furthermore, the importance of being known as a non-discrimination destination is crucial for destination competitiveness. This means non-discrimination regardless of the tourists' race, nationality, religion, sexual orientation or gender identity. Destinations capable of effectively managing the environmental, socio-cultural and economic impacts of tourism while delivering a top-tier visitor experience are better equipped to thrive in the competitive tourism landscape and manage their sustainability. Sound tourism decision-making benefits not only the city, country, or stakeholders but also visitors as it influences first-time visits or plans to revisit a destination. This model thus also has practical value for all tourism stakeholders and visitors from a marketing perspective. The benefit of using a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach for competitive and sustainable tourism decisions cannot be stressed enough. Furthermore, the results of this study support Mazilu et al's. (2023) view

that prosperous tourism should have a holistic approach that includes both sustainable and competitive aspects to managing the tourism destination.

Managerial Implications

This study aimed to develop and validate a comprehensive, robust model for competitive and sustainable tourism that can be applied to developing and developed countries. The findings of this study are valuable for marketers, tourism bodies, travel agents and tourism policymakers in planning to enable destination competitiveness and sustainability purposefully. This study outlines the importance of paying attention to external environmental forces to create a favourable destination image inviting potential first-time and revisiting travellers. As the external environment differs for each destination, the model can be fine-tuned to develop tailor-made political, market, socio-economic, technology and tourism policy strategies. A coherent destination marketing plan can be developed by engaging all tourism stakeholders to attain a prosperous tourism industry. A meeting between the stakeholders can be implemented where they can communicate their expectations, identify implementation risks and set clear destination marketing collaboration objectives for destination competitiveness and sustainability, which could benefit all involved. These developed strategies can be compared to the marketing strategies of best-practice nations to enable effective benchmarking to measure progress regarding destination competitiveness and sustainability and to identify challenging environmental factors.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study occurred at a specific time and tested specific items for each environmental condition factor. Given that environmental conditions can change over time, as was evident during the COVID-19 period, and influence tourism greatly, risk management strategies should be investigated to be better prepared during disruptions. This will enable being prepared to respond to crises. A limitation of the study is that Harman's single-factor test was not conducted to address common method bias. Future research could also consider dynamic factors such as geopolitical tensions and global incidents such as pandemics, natural disasters and wars. Additionally, future studies could examine how technological advances, such as AI and blockchain, might be integrated into the model to improve predictive capabilities. For benchmarking, future research can be conducted annually to test whether the stated model is still applicable for the political, market-related, technological and socio-economic conditions or whether the strategies must be modified or replaced with new strategies. It is thus recommended that longitudinal studies be conducted to track which political and socio-economic conditions affect tourism competitiveness and which market and technological conditions affect sustainability over time. Additionally, the present-day effectiveness of specific tourism policy initiatives for competitiveness in different geopolitical contexts could provide valuable insights for tourism policymakers and industry stakeholders. Overall, considering and addressing the complex interplay of environmental conditions is essential for fostering a more competitive tourism sector that contributes positively to economic growth and benefits the community while satisfying tourists. By meeting these environmental conditions, destinations can attract new visitors and encourage returning tourists, which in turn promotes sustainability within the tourist destination.



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