The Role of Product Quality and Product Value in Ecotourism Destinations on Revisit Intention

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Author(s) Bio

Sheena Bidin (PhD) is a senior lecturer in the Department of Recreation and Ecotourism, Faculty Forestry and Environment, UPM. She has been involved with several research projects based on ecotourism with a special interest in marketing, community empowerment and conservation learning. She has a specific interest in engaging research improving the quality of ecotourism products in Malaysia through marketing and product development as well as enhancing the conservation learning of tourists and local communities in the area ecotourism.

Introduction

Despite the wealth of natural resources that can potentially be developed as premier ecotourism destinations in Malaysia, there is an existing gap of knowledge in understanding what constitutes product value and quality and how these affects visitors purchase behaviors in the context of ecotourism. With consideration to the previous impact of Covid-19 pandemic, tourism is already returning to pre-pandemic levels; with trends showing that visitors are looking for products that gives personalised, meaningful, and intimate experiences such as nature, rural areas and culture, and eco- tourism (UNWTO, 2020).

Based on these findings, post Covid-19 research regarding consumer purchase behaviors particularly in ecotourism areas are pivotal to prepare state managers to design and market products in ecotourism destinations. As such, the ability to establish a profile of tourist based on their psychographic and behavioral will assist in designing and marketing products in ecotourism destinations based on the profiles and segments preferences, demographics, and behaviours.

As countries such as Southeast Asia possesses natural and cultural resources for high quality ecotourism destination, research that investigates tourist typology and

relationships on perceived visitors' assessments on its perceived product value and quality is essential to assist management in improving ecotourism destinations. This is particularly important to strengthen countries such as Malaysia's ecotourism destinations by the year 2026. Therefore, this study profiles visitors segments that visits ecotourism destinations in Malaysia and explore segments differences in relation to perceived ecotourism product quality and value, as well as intention to revisit nature-based and ecotourism destinations in Malaysia.

Literature Review

In Malaysia, the understanding surrounding of product quality and value in both tourism and ecotourism remains a neglected area of research. There has been limited research that explores the development of ecotourism destinations in regard to product quality and authenticity to be developed as a premier ecotourism destination in Malaysia. In fact, the current report in the revised National Ecotourism Plan 2016-2025 (NEP, 2016), shows that one of the weaknesses regarding ecotourism development in Malaysia is the lack of research in product development, which may in part be due to the lack of clarity in defining and attributing indicators that measures ecotourism product quality and value. There is also a scarcity of current knowledge in understanding how visitors experience and satisfaction affects perceived product authenticity in the context of ecotourism areas in Malaysia.

To prepare for the full reopening of tourism post Covid 19, further understanding on how destinations quality and value are affected due to trauma and fear from diseases and perceived risk are needed. After the pandemic, trends are showing that visitors are looking for products that gives personalised, meaningful, and intimate experiences such as nature, rural areas and culture, and eco- tourism (UNWTO, 2020). Based on these trends, research regarding consumer purchase behaviors and how quality and value are perceived by visitors, particularly in ecotourism areas are pivotal to prepare state managers to design and market products in ecotourism destinations.

However there are limited studies in ecotourism destinations that seeks to understand what constitutes value and quality in ecotourism areas and how crisis such as Covid 19 are impacted affect tourists' image and purchase behaviour. With the exception of studies done by Ahmad, Jamaludin, Zuraimi et al.(2020) and Ling, Ramli And Rahman (2020) on the impact of Covid19 on visitors travel behaviour in Malaysia, there are currently no known empirical research that attempts to explore relationships between the impact of Covid 19 on visitors intention to visit and perceived quality and value of ecotourism destinations in Malaysia.

Product Quality and Value

Product quality and product value are two important concepts in marketing that gives information about how consumers perceives and view a product (Murphy, Pritchard & Smith,2000; Snoj, Korda, & Mumel, 2004). There is a myriad of literature on product quality and value, however this concept is somewhat vague in tourism as there are different understandings on what constitutes product value and quality in tourism (Murphy et.al., 2000). This is true as tourism constitutes different components that combines tangible aspects such as physical facilities and intangible aspects such as the experience itself.

The understanding of tourism product value and quality is complicated with the different components such as accommodation, services, transportations within diverse types of tourism such as ecotourism, wildlife tourism, sports tourism, and adventure tourism. As stated by Murphy et al. (2000), these limitations have restricted tourism research so that little is known about which destination features lead to visitor perceptions of quality and value. This further leads to the development of a conceptual model on product value and quality in which two factors; destinations environment (e.g., economic,cultural, technological) and service infrastructures (e.g., accommodation, transportation , travel services) affects product quality and value (Murphy et al. 2000) . Murphy et al. (2000) study found that destination environment and infrastructure are important variables that affects perceived product quality and value, and perceived quality is a strong predictor of visitors' intention for revisit in the next 2 years.

While several research has noted the influence of perceived product value and quality over purchase behaviour such as intention to visit (Chen& Tsai, 2007; Loi, So & Lo et al.,2017; Pandza, 2015; Lee, Petrick & Crompton, 2007), there are limited research that investigates how product quality and value is impacted during or after a crisis. Considering tourist behaviors are likely to change after the pandemic, as shown by UNWTO (2020) research, studies that explores how a destination or a particular product fares during times of crisis are particularly important in regards to marketing and managerial implications. In short, these will help managers to understand and plan accordingly. Therefore, this study assesses perceived product quality, perceived product value, and the factors that affects intentions to re-visit ecotourism destinations in Malaysia among the tourist segments.

==Method==

The study site for this study is Kinabalu National Park, a well-known UNESCO World Heritage Site in Malaysia. The target population for this study is local and international

visitors that is visiting the ecotourism destinations between April – July 2024. This study employs a quantitative method design using an online questionnaire to answer the main objectives of the study. The questionnaire as the main instrument was selected, based on a number of advantages. Firstly, questionnaires are relatively cheap and provide flexibility in sampling. They can be used to reach a large sample and researchers are flexible in terms of choosing the groups to be sampled (Bourque, Fink & Fielder, 2003). Secondly, questionnaires enable researchers to pre-determine the questions and generally ensures a high rate of completion (Kolb, 2008). Thirdly, questionnaires can be used to collect a mix of quantitative and qualitative data (Johnson & Christensen, 2013). Due to the nature of this study which necessitates visitors to be sampled on-site after their ecotourism experience, a self-administered questionnaire was deemed to be the most appropriate method to collect data. Three locations were chosen to enable visitors to scan the online questionnaire. Upon completion, visitors that has submitted the response to the questionnaire receives a token in the form of a handmade keychain.

The questionnaire adapts Murphy et.al (2000) study on destination product and its impact on traveller perceptions. There are four main sections in the questionnaire which seeks to measure, 1) Self-reported Segment of visitors, Visitors Travel Characteristics and Behaviour; 2) Perception towards Ecotourism Product Quality; 3) Perception towards Ecotourism Product Value and 4) Demographics and Intention to Travel. Descriptive analysis are used in this study to produce a general finding of the visitors profile, while regression analysis is currently being conducted to explain relationship between travel intention and product quality and value.

<mark>Results</mark>

A total of 244 usable responses was obtained for the study. Descriptive findings are reported in this study as further statistical analysis is still ongoing. About 60 percent of the respondents were between 31-50 years old, with an average monthly income between RM2500 – RM 6000. Almost half (51 percent) travels with group of friends, as this could be due to travelling for mountain climbing. The findings in relation to types of segments are similar to previous findings that was done on ecotourist segmentation (Sheena et.al., 2015). In this study, the main segment (58 percent) that visits Kinabalu National Park are structured types of ecotourist who appreciates nature and learning about nature, however, favors comfort during travel. Around 30 percent of the visitors are categorized as hard ecotourist which prefers to visit undisturbed destinations and are willing to rough it out during travel. In regards to product quality, majority of the respondents rates destination environments variables (e.g, natural attractions, environmental practices, unique natural beauty, climate and scenery) and service and infrastructures highly agreeable, with high scores on mountain guides and national park staffs. More than 70

percent of the respondents indicated that they have climb Mount Kinabalu, with more than 40 percent indicated that the level of difficulty was between hard to very hard. In terms of product value, which was measured in regard to time and money invested, majority of the respondents rated highly on product value and intend to revisit the destination in future. The findings of this study indicates that product quality such as destination and its environments, as well as physical attributes such as infrastructures, safety measures and services correspond to a high indicator of perceived product value and intention to visit.

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