

Does Tourism Destination Competitiveness Explain Middle-Income Countries' Tourism Performance and Quality of Life? A Secondary Data Approach

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Abstract: This study investigated whether tourism destination competitiveness (TDC) explains tourism performance (TP) and quality of life (QoL) among middle-income countries (MICs). The study used a quantitative methodology with a cross-sectional data sample from 67 MICs. The study findings path analysis illuminates the pivotal factors of core resources and destination management in explaining the variance in tourism performance within the context of MICs. Surprisingly, supporting resources, tourism prices and environmental quality do not induce tourism performance. On the other hand, this study corroborates a robust and positive influence of tourism performance on enhancing the quality of life of middle-income countries. This research progressed over previous studies by developing and empirically testing a causal model for measuring TDC. It offers valuable insights for stakeholders in the tourism industry and policymakers in MICs who aspire to enhance a destination's competitive standing while safeguarding its residents' well-being.

Keywords: Tourism destination competitiveness, tourism performance, quality of life, middle-income countries, PLS-SEM

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Introduction

Tourism offers vast economic potential to many destinations worldwide (Salee et al., 2022). The growing importance of tourism in the global economy, especially in middle-income countries (MICs), has prompted extensive research into understanding and enhancing tourism destination competitiveness (TDC). Particularly for MICs, tourism has emerged as a significant socio-economic force, driving economic development and becoming indispensable in strategic planning (Uysal et al., 2016). However, existing literature underscores no one-size-fits-all formula for determining the competitiveness of tourism destinations (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Michael et al., 2019; Dupeyras & MacCallum, 2013). Consequently, identifying effective strategies to enhance destination competitiveness becomes a vital point of discussion in tourism policy and the motivation behind developing TDC models (Croes & Kubickova, 2013; Dwyer, 2022; Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019a).

Tourism performance (TP) is another key aspect of measuring competitiveness (Croes & Kubickova, 2013). However, as Ritchie and Crouch (2003) cautioned, destination competitiveness does not automatically translate into tourism performance. The relationship between competitiveness and performance is more complex than it may seem (Croes & Kubickova, 2013; Kaurav et al., 2015). The complexity of this relationship arises from the multiple factors influencing both competitiveness and performance, including market dynamics, stakeholder engagement, and external economic conditions (Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019b). Furthermore, competitiveness may enhance a destination's appeal, but translating this into sustained tourism performance requires strategic management, continuous adaptation to market trends, and addressing local challenges (Croes & Kubickova, 2013; Uyar et al., 2023).

In a broader sense, a competitive tourism destination is pivotal in enhancing and sustaining residents' quality of life (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Thus, the pursuit of competitiveness in tourism destinations, promising prosperity for their inhabitants, has become a focal point of the global tourism policy discourse (Knežević Cvelbar et al., 2016). Furthermore, understanding the intricate relationship between destination competitiveness and quality of life is crucial for advancing knowledge in the ever-evolving field of destination competitiveness theory (Croes & Semrad, 2018). It is surprising that despite the significance of these issues, there has been limited research on the connection between destination competitiveness and tourism performance, with inconclusive results (Assaf & Josiassen, 2012; Assaf & Tsionas, 2015; Croes & Kubickova, 2013; Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019b; Mazanec et al., 2007). Equally, scant attention has been given to the link between TDC and quality of life (Knežević Cvelbar et al., 2016).

Historically, developing countries and MICs were on the fringes of global tourism flows, but they have now emerged as vital growth regions for tourism (Goffi et al.,

2019). Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented disruption to the travel and tourism (T&T) industry worldwide. The encouraging news is that recovery is underway, although not uniform across all market segments (WEF, 2022). International tourism is on the path to returning to pre-pandemic levels. However, a crucial question remains unanswered: can tourism competitiveness enhance the quality of life for residents in MICs? This question has received limited attention in the existing literature, especially concerning developing countries (Hosseini & Hosseini, 2021).

While existing research has extensively examined TDC in general, this study uniquely addresses the underexplored link between TDC and QoL, particularly in MICs, which have traditionally been marginalised in the global tourism discourse. Moreover, the study goes beyond merely assessing competitiveness by critically analysing how the determinants of TDC impact tourism performance and, in turn, influence residents' quality of life. This comprehensive approach fills significant gaps in the literature. It provides insights into how strategic tourism management can catalyse socio-economic development in MICs, especially in the post-pandemic recovery phase. The study's emphasis on MICs, emerging as vital growth regions in global tourism, adds further relevance and timeliness to its contribution. The findings provide valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders, aiding in formulating strategies that align with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, aiming for sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth.

This study aims to bridge these research gaps by investigating the determinants of TDC and exploring the relationships among TDC, TP, and QoL, particularly in the context of MICs. To achieve this, the study pursues three primary objectives: firstly, to scrutinise the determinants of TDC; secondly, to probe the links between these determinants and tourism performance; and lastly, to examine the relationship between tourism performance and quality of life. This article is structured into five sections. Section One provides an introduction and outlines the study's objectives, while the subsequent sections are organised as follows: Section Two offers a concise review of the TDC literature and the development of hypotheses, Section Three discusses the methodology, Section Four presents the results, and Section Five provides the conclusions, implications, limitations, as well as highlights areas for future research.

Literature Review

The intricate concept of tourism destination competitiveness (TDC) presents a multifaceted challenge (Gómez-Vega & Picazo-Tadeo, 2019), with scholars grappling to articulate its precise definition (Novais et al., 2018). Ritchie and Crouch (1993) introduced the Calgary Model (CM), proposing that the principles of economic competitiveness, such as those advocated by Porter (1990), are equally applicable

at the destination level (Wilde & Cox, 2008, p. 468). Over time, this conceptual framework, also known as the Ritchie and Crouch Model (2003), has gained prominence after undergoing various validation stages. Another influential TDC model is the Integrated Model (IM), also referred to as the Dwyer and Kim Model (2003), which shares similarities with CM but emphasises more robust interconnections among TDC elements (Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019a). Most studies predominantly rely on CM or IM to study destination competitiveness (Xu & Au, 2023).

In contrast, Heath (2003) introduced a destination competitiveness model that aligns with the broader competitiveness framework that Porter (1990) established and incorporates critical determinants from IM and CM. This model emphasises the integration of various competitive elements to elevate destination attractiveness. Similarly, the Competitiveness Monitor model developed by Gooroochurn and Sugiyarto (2005) provides a robust evaluation framework with 23 criteria for assessing destination competitiveness. This extensive set of determinants offers a nuanced approach to understanding and improving competitiveness. However, despite these advancements, the literature consistently highlights the absence of a universal set of determinants applicable to all destinations (Enright & Newton, 2004; Goffi, 2013). The relative importance of these factors often varies significantly both within and across destinations (Crouch, 2011; Michael et al., 2019), indicating the need for context-specific evaluations and tailored strategies.

Core resources, such as natural sites, protected areas, cultural landmarks, and sports facilities, are critical in attracting tourists to a destination (Dwyer et al., 2014; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). These elements are fundamental to the competitiveness of a destination, as they constitute the primary attractions that define its unique appeal and charm (Go & Govers, 2000). The preservation and enhancement of these resources are crucial, as they form the bedrock of a destination's allure and are integral to sustaining its attractiveness in a competitive global tourism market. Cultural appeal, in particular, serves as a distinctive factor that differentiates destinations and contributes to their unique positioning (McKercher, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). In addition, supplementary factors and services—such as hospitality, infrastructure, and local amenities—complement and enrich the overall tourism experience, thereby influencing tourism performance and overall satisfaction (Assaf & Josiassen, 2012). Thus, a balanced focus on both core resources and supplementary services is essential for optimising tourism performance and maintaining destination competitiveness.

Effective destination management is crucial for the success of the tourism industry, with marketing, service quality, and hospitality serving as foundational elements (Buhalis & Spada, 2000; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Osmanković et al., 2010; Ritchie & Crouch, 1993). A well-managed destination can significantly enhance tourist satisfaction, contributing to superior destination performance and competitiveness (Alegre & Garau, 2011; Mihalič, 2013). In this context, marketing

attracts tourists and positively influences a destination's success and profitability (Cizmar & Weber, 2000). The increasing emphasis on destination marketing reflects its growing importance in boosting destination competitiveness (de Souza et al., 2020). Furthermore, effective destination management encompasses comprehensive demand and supply management strategies, optimising visitor experiences, and maintaining a competitive edge (Bethune et al., 2022). This multifaceted approach is essential for sustaining tourism growth and ensuring that destinations remain attractive and viable in a competitive global market.

Recent research on TDC has critically shifted its focus to demand conditions, introducing the concept of tourism price as a significant factor. This concept includes price competitiveness indices, exchange rates, and variations in consumer prices (Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019b). Gatt and Falzon (2014) highlighted that the relative price of a destination is a crucial determinant in travel decision-making. Indeed, fluctuations in tourism prices in tourist-generating countries can significantly affect tourism demand, either enhancing or diminishing it (Belloumi, 2010; Schubert et al., 2011). Furthermore, the perception of a destination's ability to offer a welcoming environment plays a vital role in shaping its image and overall competitiveness (Hall & Page, 2014). The increasing emphasis on environmental quality as a determinant of TDC underscores its growing importance in the industry, as evidenced by studies that recognise its impact on competitiveness and tourist satisfaction (Bojanic, 2011; Cucculelli & Goffi, 2016; Esparon et al., 2015; Hassan, 2000; Hu & Wall, 2005; Huybers & Bennett, 2003; Mihalič, 2000, 2013). This broader perspective highlights how economic factors and environmental quality collectively influence destination appeal and competitiveness.

Research examining how TDC influences tourism performance remains scarce (Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019b). Similarly, limited attention has been devoted to investigating the impact of tourism development on the well-being of residents at a national level (Meng et al., 2010; Perdue & Gustke, 1991). Additionally, researchers argued that existing TDC models (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Heath, 2003; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003) primarily cater to more significant regions and nations, such as Australia, Brazil, North America, Korea, and South Africa, potentially limiting their applicability to resource-limited, smaller, emerging economies or MICs (Azzopardi & Nash, 2016). Moreover, these studies have struggled to establish causal relationships among the TDC determinants (Assaker et al., 2011; Croes & Rivera, 2010; Tugcu, 2014). To contribute to the existing TDC literature, this study introduced a modified causal competitiveness model (see Figure 1) designed to evaluate destination competitiveness within the context of MICs. Five TDC determinants were identified: core resources, supporting resources, destination management, tourism price, and environmental quality. In line with the relationships mentioned above, this study posits the following hypotheses:

- H1. Core resources significantly and positively influence tourism performance.
- H2. Supporting resources significantly and positively influence tourism performance.
- H3. Destination management significantly and positively influences tourism performance.
- H4. Tourism prices significantly and negatively influence tourism performance.
- H5. Environmental quality significantly and positively influences tourism performance.
- H6. Tourism performance significantly and positively influences quality of life.

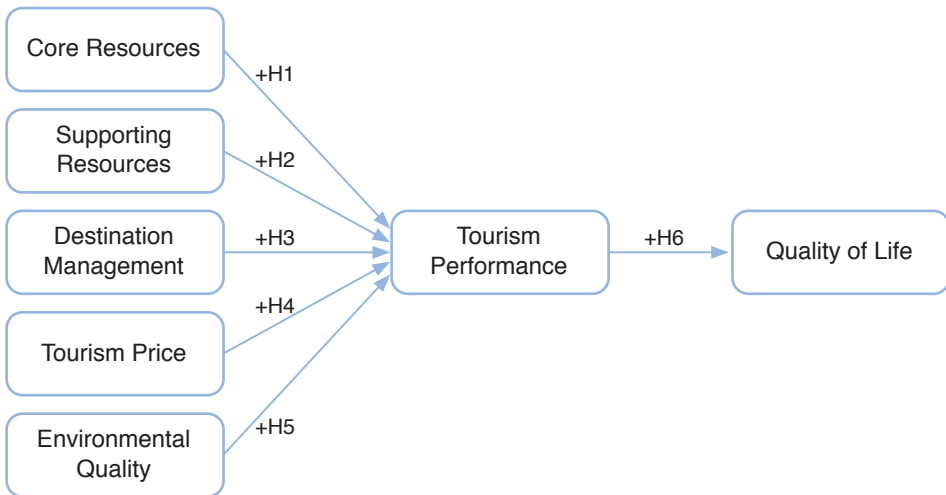


Figure 1. Hypothesised research framework

Methodology

This study used a quantitative methodology with a cross-sectional secondary data sample from middle-income countries (MICs). According to World Bank income classification thresholds, for the fiscal year 2019–2020, MICs comprised 104 economies or countries worldwide (World Bank, 2020). However, only 67 World Bank member countries were selected for analysis based on secondary data available from numerous international organisations, including the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report (TTCR) published by the World Economic Forum (WEF), the World Bank (WB), World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), and United Nations Development Program (UNDP). It is beyond dispute that

the data released by these international organisations are more accurate than other international tourism data sources. Data from secondary sources are primarily 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 secondary sources were regarded as the most favourable option for data collection to achieve the purposes of this study, and secondary data tends to be reliable and readily available (Dolata et al., 2015; Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019b; Vartanian, 2010).

This research suggested five exogenous constructs, namely core resources, supporting resources, destination management, tourism price, and environmental quality as determinants of TDC. Two endogenous constructs called tourism performance and quality of life were treated as outcomes of TDC. The indicators were selected based on a few fundamental principles of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which focus on importance, methodological soundness, and data accessibility (Nardo et al., 2005). Each construct was operationalised based on a thorough review of the TDC literature and consisted of the related indicators. Based on their importance in describing the proposed dimension, a total of 33 indicators were initially selected.

Most of the indicators of exogenous constructs were defined from the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report (Calderwood & Soshkin, 2019), which provides a broad range of indicators for evaluating TDC. The tourism performance construct considers indicators like international tourist arrivals, international tourism receipts, and tourism contribution to GDP (Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019b; Perez Leon et al., 2022). In addition, the WB database and the WTTC report were used to collect data on tourism performance indicators. Finally, the quality of life construct includes the human development index (HDI) and the Legatum prosperity index (LPI). Croes and Kubickova (2013) used the HDI, while Gligorić et al. (2019) used the LPI to assess residents' quality of life or well-being. The quality-of-life data were collected from two international sources, the UNDP and the Legatum Institute Foundation. After collecting data from international sources, the data screening procedure was followed to check that the data was not missing, and that the data was entered correctly.

This study adopted Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) to test the research hypotheses. PLS-SEM "provides a flexible and powerful means of simultaneously assessing the quality of measurement and examining causal relationships among constructs" (Wang & Wang, 2019, p. 1). Similarly, Lauro and Vinzi (2004) argued that PLS-SEM is especially useful for causal-predictive analysis in situations of high complexity and limited theoretical knowledge availability. The advantages of this soft modelling approach include understanding theoretical conditions, distributional considerations, measurement conditions (do Valle & Assaker, 2016; Hair et al., 2012; Nitzl, 2016) and practical considerations (Thompson

et al., 1995). Moreover, PLS-SEM is an exploratory statistical method for analysing secondary data (Hair et al., 2014; Nitzl, 2016).

A notable advantage of PLS-SEM is its flexibility in accommodating single-item and formative measures without imposing restrictions (Hair et al., 2014; Hair Jr, Hult, Ringle, Sarstedt et al., 2021). This characteristic is particularly beneficial for research focusing on predictive analysis rather than purely explanatory models. Unlike traditional methods emphasising relationships, PLS-SEM prioritises prediction, making it highly suitable for investigating the sources of competitive advantage and success drivers (Hair et al., 2011). Additionally, PLS-SEM is advantageous for studies with specific requirements, such as those not adhering to normal data distribution or involving small sample sizes, as it does not necessitate these conditions (Sarstedt et al., 2017; Wong, 2013). This methodological approach aligns well with the research objectives, particularly in contexts where prediction and flexibility are paramount, further enhancing its applicability and robustness in addressing complex research questions.

Examining the measurement models is the first step in analysing PLS-SEM results (Hair et al., 2019). This assessment draws on different measures, depending on whether a construct is measured reflectively or formatively (Ali et al., 2018; Hair Jr, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2021). Theoretical considerations were used to decide whether the measurement model was formative or reflective: (i) the nature of the construct, (ii) the direction of causality between the indicators and the latent construct, and (iii) the characteristics of the indicators used to measure the construct (Hair Jr et al., 2016). Based on the relevant measurement and theoretical considerations, two constructs, supporting resources (SR) and destination management (DM), were treated as reflective constructs. In contrast, five constructs, core resources (CR), tourism price (TPr), environmental quality (EQ), tourism performance (TP), and quality of life (QoL), were treated as formative constructs.

Analysis and Results

To evaluate the reflective measurement models, four parameters were examined: (i) indicator reliability, (ii) internal consistency reliability, (iii) convergent validity, and (iv) discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2019). This study considered HTMT a reliable tool for assessing discriminant validity because the Fornell-Larcker criterion has limitations that do not justify its reputation for rigour and its widespread use in empirical research (Benitez et al., 2020). Table 1 presents the outer loading, composite reliability (CR) and the average variance extracted (AVE) scores for the reflective measurement models (destination management and supporting resources constructs). Due to a loading value of less than 0.708, the indicator of government prioritisation of the travel and tourism industry (0.692), reliability of police services (0.394) and quality of tourism infrastructure (0.663) were dropped (Hair et al.,

2019) from the destination management and supporting resources constructs, respectively. The HTMT value is 0.785, below the suggested threshold, meaning that discriminant validity was present. This study, therefore, concluded that the measurement model is discriminately valid (Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 1. Validity and reliability test results of reflective measurement models

Latent Variable	Indicators	Loadings	CR	AVE
Destination Management	Treatment of customers	0.843	0.900	0.693
	Effectiveness of marketing and branding to attract tourists	0.720		
	Extent of staff training	0.921		
	Ease of finding skilled employees	0.834		
Supporting Resources	Quality of air transport infrastructure	0.881	0.915	0.643
	Quality of roads	0.786		
	Quality of railroad infrastructure	0.712		
	ICT use for B2B transactions	0.843		
	Internet use for B2C transactions	0.752		
	Quality of port infrastructure	0.823		

In order to assess the formative measurement model, this study examined the indicator collinearity first. According to Hair et al. (2019), the statistical significance and relevance of the indicators are assessed after the collinearity assessment. This study used the variance inflation factor (VIF) to determine whether there was a correlation between the formative indicators (Hair et al., 2019). VIF values greater than 5 suggest a collinearity problem (Becker et al., 2015; Hair et al., 2011; Hair et al., 2019); therefore, items like number of large sports stadiums (VIF=9.196) and international tourist arrivals (VIF=6.571) were removed for high collinearity from the core resources and tourism performance constructs, respectively before moving on to the following analysis.

This study adopted the decision-making process for testing formative indicator weights as suggested by Hair et al. (2021). In the formative indicator weight significance testing decision-making process, three items (hotel and restaurant price index, purchasing power parity (PPP), fuel price levels) from tourism price, and one item, total protected areas from the core resources construct, were found to be insignificant and removed from the model. Subsequently, the remaining 14 indicators evidenced satisfactory validity and reliability (see Table 2).

Table 2. Outer loadings, VIF, significance and relevance of the formative indicators

	Outer Loadings	VIF	T-statistic	P-value	Statistical Significance
CR 1 → Core Resources	0.820	4.524	8.291	0.000	Significant
CR 2 → Core Resources	0.348	1.863	3.299	0.001	Significant
CR 4 → Core Resources	0.831	3.957	8.370	0.000	Significant
CR 5 → Core Resources	0.831	2.379	3.712	0.000	Significant
CR 7 → Core Resources	0.902	3.431	13.979	0.000	Significant
EQ 1 → Environmental Quality	0.644	1.109	2.025	0.043	Significant
EQ_2 → Environmental Quality	0.474	3.390	2.342	0.019	Significant
EQ_3 → Environmental Quality	-0.553	2.176	2.963	0.003	Significant
EQ_4 → Environmental Quality	0.531	3.223	2.703	0.007	Significant
QoL_HDI → Quality of Life	0.832	2.906	3.826	0.000	Significant
QoL_LPI → Quality of Life	0.999	2.906	5.609	0.000	Significant
TP_3 → Tourism Performance	0.917	4.618	11.480	0.000	Significant
TP_2 → Tourism Performance	0.744	2.003	6.008	0.000	Significant
TPr_1 → Tourism Price	1.000	1.041			Significant

Note: Critical t-values for a two-tailed test are 1.96 (significance level = 5%) and 2.58 (significance level = 1%).

With satisfactory results for the reliability and validity of the construct measures, the next stage was to analyse the structural model to determine the explanatory power of the proposed model and test the research hypotheses. The criteria used in assessing the structural model involved the assessment of collinearity, the coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), prediction relevance (Q^2) and estimation of path coefficient (β) (Götz et al., 2010; Hair et al., 2019). The PLS-SEM bootstrapping process was used, and based on the t-statistics output, the significance of each relationship was determined (see Table 3).

Table 3. Path coefficients, t-statistics and significance levels

Proposed Hypotheses	Path coefficient	T-statistic	P-value	Hypothesis
Core Resources → Tourism Performance	0.864***	10.386	0.000	Accepted
Destination Management → Tourism Performance	0.200*	2.257	0.024	Accepted
Environmental Quality → Tourism Performance	0.092	1.333	0.183	Rejected
Supporting Resources → Tourism Performance	-0.142	1.460	0.144	Rejected
Tourism Performance → Quality of Life	0.232**	2.997	0.003	Accepted
Tourism Price → Tourism Performance	-0.020	0.321	0.748	Rejected

Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

The coefficient of determination value ($R^2 = 0.807$) revealed that the core resources, supporting resources, destination management, environmental quality, and tourism price constructs could explain 80.7% of the variance in the tourism performance construct. These higher values ($R^2 = 0.807$) indicated a greater explanatory power (Chin, 1998; Cohen, 1988). However, the coefficient of determination of tourism performance explains a slight variance ($R^2 = 0.054$) in the quality of life, indicating a lower explanatory power. Yet, this research model was considered to be fit based on the criteria put forth by Cohen (1988). The results of the path coefficients concerning tourism performance revealed that the core resources ($\beta = 0.864$; $t = 10.386$) and destination management ($\beta = 0.200$; $t = 2.257$) were positively significant and thus confirmed the hypotheses H1 and H3. Further, the results of the path coefficients between tourism performance and quality of life were found to be positively significant ($\beta = 0.232$; $t = 2.997$) and thus, confirmed hypothesis H6.

Table 4. f^2 of factors of research model

	f^2 TP	Effect size		f^2 QoL	Effect size
Core Resources	2.784	Substantial	Tourism Performance	0.057	Weak
Destination Management	0.102	Weak			
Environmental Quality	0.033	Weak			
Supporting Resources	0.043	Weak			
Tourism Price	0.002	No effect			

In Table 4, the f^2 column reveals that core resources had a substantial effect on tourism performance, whose value ($f^2 = 2.784$) is greater than 0.35, whilst destination management, environmental quality, and supporting resources presented a weak effect (i.e., $f^2 > 0.02$). Similarly, tourism performance had a small effect size ($f^2 = 0.057$) on quality of life, but tourism price ($f^2 < 0.002$) had no effect (Cohen, 1988). Using an omission distance of 7, the study obtained a Q^2 value of 0.35 for tourism performance and 0.042 for Quality of Life, which indicated that the model had high predictive power (Chin, 1998; Hair et al., 2019).

Discussion and Implications

Discussion

This study recognised five crucial TDC determinants in the MICs context: core resources, supporting resources, destination management, tourism price, and environmental quality. This study revealed how comparative and competitive advantages work together to make a destination competitive and validated the multidimensional nature of TDC. The study also established a significant positive relationship between core resources and tourism performance, corroborating findings from previous research (Assaf & Josiassen, 2012; Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019b; Milutinovic et al., 2022). This reinforces the notion that the availability and quality of core resources are crucial determinants of effective tourism performance. Additionally, the study found that destination management positively and significantly impacts tourism performance. This aligns with the research by Knežević Cvelbar et al. (2016), which highlighted that destination management tends to exert a more substantial influence on competitiveness in developing countries compared to developed ones. This insight underscores the importance of robust destination management practices in enhancing tourism performance, particularly in contexts where resources and infrastructural development are still evolving.

This study revealed that supporting resources, including infrastructure, did not significantly predict tourism performance in MICs. This finding is consistent with the study by Hanafiah and Zulkifly (2019b), which also found that infrastructure quality is not a significant determinant of tourism performance. In contrast, other research, such as Assaf and Josiassen (2012) and Knežević Cvelbar et al. (2016), has demonstrated that infrastructure positively and significantly impacts tourism performance. The discrepancy in results may be attributed to the limited variety and quality of secondary data used to develop indicators for assessing supporting resources.

The findings also revealed that the relationship between tourism price and performance is negative and insignificant. This finding partially contradicted the findings of Hanafiah and Zulkifly (2019b), whose study confirmed that tourism

prices significantly and negatively influence tourism performance in the global context. The context of the study could have caused this contradiction. A priori, most of the travellers to MICs are from higher-income countries with more affordability, enabling them to afford the tourism price in MICs reasonably. This study finding also indicated a positive but insignificant relationship between environmental quality and tourism performance in MICs. This finding is supported by Hanafiah and Zulkifly (2019b), who recently confirmed that environmental management does not affect tourism performance.

This study critically highlights that core resources and destination management are the sole key determinants of TDC that significantly influence tourism performance in MICs. These findings corroborate existing literature, reinforcing the notion that a universal set of TDC determinants applicable to all destinations does not exist (Michael et al., 2019). The results underscore the importance of context-specific factors in shaping competitiveness, aligning with the broader understanding that TDC is highly variable across different locales. Furthermore, the study elucidates the interplay between comparative and competitive advantages in enhancing a destination's competitiveness, supporting the assertion that both advantages must work synergistically to achieve optimal tourism performance (Croes & Kubickova, 2013; Crouch, 2011). This nuanced insight contributes to a deeper understanding of how destinations can leverage their unique attributes to improve their tourism outcomes.

The findings of this study demonstrate a significant and positive influence of tourism performance on quality of life within MICs. This establishes a robust connection between tourism performance and residents' quality of life in these contexts, aligning with the theoretical frameworks posited by prominent TDC models (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Furthermore, this conclusion is corroborated by empirical research from diverse regions, including Spanish Mediterranean areas (Sánchez & López, 2015) and various Chinese provinces (Meng et al., 2010). These studies support the notion that improved tourism performance enhances economic benefits and improves local populations' living conditions. This consistency across different geographical contexts underscores the broader applicability of the findings and highlights the critical role of tourism in enhancing the quality of life in MICs.

Such findings reject the claim that tourism contributes insignificantly to small countries (Sequeira & Maças Nunes, 2008) and that the competitiveness of destinations has no statistically significant effect on the contribution of tourism to economic development (Webster & Ivanov, 2014). Further, the finding also differs from the claim of Cárdenas-García et al. (2015) that tourism growth only contributes to improving socio-economic conditions or quality of life in those countries with a higher level of development. MICs at a lower level of development could still benefit

from being a competitive destination, depending on MICs' tourism resources and deployment capabilities.

Theoretical Implications

This research represents a significant advancement in the study of TDC by developing and empirically testing a comprehensive causal model. The study extends the current literature by integrating TDC with TP and QoL, an area previously underexplored in MIC contexts. By incorporating MICs into the research model, this study differentiates itself from prior studies that predominantly focused on high-income or developed destinations (Azzopardi & Nash, 2016; Cucculelli & Goffi, 2016). This novel approach contributes to a better understanding of how TDC impacts TP and QoL in less-studied contexts.

This research also advances the definitional and conceptual frameworks of TDC by translating them into an explanatory model. It empirically validates the structural relationships proposed in the conceptual model, demonstrating that core resources and destination management are pivotal determinants of MICs. This finding reinforces that TDC determinants are context-specific and not universally applicable across all destinations (Assaf & Josiassen, 2012; Crouch & Ritchie, 1999). It also highlights the necessity for tailored TDC models that consider local contextual factors, challenging the assumption of a one-size-fits-all approach in tourism competitiveness studies.

The study elucidates the ultimate purpose of TDC by establishing a clear link between tourism performance and residents' quality of life. This aligns with the foundational aim of TDC models, which is to promote socio-economic prosperity (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999). The positive relationship between tourism performance and QoL in MICs confirms the reliability and validity of existing TDC literature in addressing practical and normative aspects of tourism competitiveness (Dwyer et al., 2014; Mihalič, 2000). This contribution is crucial for policymakers and destination managers seeking to enhance the socio-economic benefits of tourism.

By utilising partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) to assess the proposed relationships, the study adheres to contemporary methodological standards (Benitez et al., 2020; Hair et al., 2011). This approach supports the robustness of the findings and demonstrates the applicability of PLS-SEM in tourism research, offering a methodological benchmark for future studies exploring similar constructs. The study's findings significantly affect destination management practices, particularly in MICs. By highlighting the importance of core resources and destination management, the research suggests that MICs can enhance their competitiveness by focusing on these areas. This insight is particularly relevant for destinations aiming to leverage their unique attributes to improve tourism

performance and, consequently, the quality of life for residents (Buhalis, 2000; Mihalič, 2013).

Practical Implications

In addition to its theoretical implications, this study also carries significant practical implications. Marketers and destination management organisations (DMOs) must understand tourism performance factors to create effective marketing plans and strategies for international tourists. Meanwhile, many MICs have adopted tourism as a poverty reduction and economic development strategy. Hence, gaining competitiveness for tourism destinations, with its assurance of prosperity for people, is a vital aspect of the tourism policy debate and one of the leading issues in destination management. Policymakers need timely and reliable information on how tourism affects QoL, which helps them formulate development strategies and investment policies.

The findings of this study provide evidence concerning the effect of tourism performance on residents' quality of life, which is especially crucial for MICs policymakers, where achieving TDC with its promise of prosperity for residents is a concern. This study suggests that MICs should prioritise core resources and destination management when designing and implementing policies to enhance tourism performance. Thus, the research findings will help middle-income countries' DMOs address the "strategic drift" by identifying and evaluating TDC determinants' importance and relative influence on tourism performance. The findings of this study can also serve as a reliable source of information and be useful for MIC policymakers addressing challenges in their tourism industry and wanting to implement tourism as a strategy for reducing poverty and diversifying their economy. Consequently, the study is of broader relevance to tourism academics and MICs tourism practitioners.

Although tourism in MICs is expanding, there is still a long way to go before MICs reach the same tourism competitiveness levels as developed or advanced countries. Fundamental changes in perceptions of tourism planning and development, tourism management, and destination marketing are necessary to increase tourism performance and improve residents' quality of life in MICs. These improvements are essential for boosting tourism performance and enhancing the overall quality of life for residents in MICs, as a thriving tourism sector can contribute to economic growth and social well-being.

Conclusion

The identification of core resources and destination management as crucial determinants in middle-income countries (MICs) offers direct implications for achieving SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 9 (Industry,

Innovation, and Infrastructure). This study underscores the critical role these factors play in enhancing tourism performance, which, in turn, contributes to economic development and job creation in MICs. The positive correlation between tourism performance and quality of life further supports SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality). Effectively managed tourism can thus catalyse socio-economic prosperity, poverty alleviation, and improved well-being in these regions.

Moreover, the negative influence of supporting resources on tourism performance reveals a significant area for improvement in infrastructure development within MICs, with potential impacts on SDG 9 by fostering sustainable and resilient infrastructure. This study's development and empirical testing of a causal model for measuring tourism destination competitiveness (TDC) also advances academic knowledge, aligning with the goals of SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 17 (Global Partnership for Sustainable Development) by promoting research and collaboration in sustainable tourism development. Ultimately, policymakers can better align their strategies with SDG 8 and 9 by prioritising core resources and destination management. Additionally, the study's focus on tourism's impact on residents' quality of life provides essential insights for policymakers, aiding in the pursuit of SDG 1, SDG 3, and SDG 10.

While the results are attention-grabbing in light of a new context, a few possible study limitations must be acknowledged. First, a small population (104 MICs) restricts the study's sample size, in which only 67 MICs were included based on data availability. However, this limitation does not change the validity of the study findings. Next, the study used cross-section data instead of panel data, mainly from 2019. More recent tourism performance data, such as 2020 and 2021, were not considered because this period coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic phase, which almost restricted international tourism flow. Future research using panel data points would improve the study's findings. To enhance the generalisability of the findings, future research should consider expanding the sample to encompass a broader range of countries, including those with high and low incomes and diverse geographic regions. This expansion would facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the determinants of TDC and its connection to tourism performance and quality of life. Furthermore, conducting comparative analyses (in high, middle, and low-income countries) would help identify contextual factors influencing the relationships under investigation.

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Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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