Evaluating Culture as the Key Determinant of Tourist Arrivals in East Coast Malaysia

*Hazrin Izwan Che Haron@Shafiee., Mohd Sadad Mahmud., Hamdy Abdullah., Sheikh Ahmad Faiz Sheikh Ahmad Tajuddin

Faculty of Business and Management Sciences, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Terengganu, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of cultural factors in attracting tourists to East Coast Malaysia, examining how culture, alongside facilities, infrastructure, strategies, and policies, influences tourist arrivals. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 386 tourists staying at 3-star and above hotels in Terengganu, Pahang, and Kelantan through a stratified random sampling technique. The survey, conducted in Malay and English, covered socio-demographics, tourist expectations, facilities, infrastructure, strategies, local culture, and policies. Data analysis via SPSS and AMOS revealed that culture is the most significant determinant of tourist arrivals (ß=0.282), with cultural events and festivals enhancing tourism appeal and community identity. Facilities, infrastructure, policies, and strategies followed in significance. While perceptions of these factors were consistent across local and international tourists, cultural factors were rated significantly higher, highlighting their critical role in tourism. The study emphasizes preserving and promoting cultural heritage as a means to boost tourism, suggesting community involvement and effective marketing strategies to sustain growth. Despite its focus on East Coast Malaysia, which may limit generalizability, this research provides valuable insights into leveraging cultural heritage to enhance tourism appeal and competitiveness.

Keywords: Tourism Sustainability, Cultural Tourism, Tourism development, East Coast Peninsular Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

The East Coast of Malaysia, comprising Terengganu, Kelantan, and Pahang, is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and unique traditional arts. This region, featuring a continuous sandy beach from Kota Bharu through Kuala Terengganu to Kuantan, is a prominent tourist destination in Malaysia. The tourism sector plays a crucial role in showcasing the country globally, with the distinct Malay arts and culture in these states driving economic growth and generating revenue.

East Coast Malaysia: A Cultural and Natural Haven for Tourists

Terengganu, with Kuala Terengganu as its capital, spans 1,295,638.3 hectares and has a population of 1.18 million. Predominantly Malay, it features attractions like the State Museum, Pasar Payang, Batu Burok Beach, and the Perhentian, Redang, and Kapas Islands. The state aims to become a premier tourist destination by leveraging its natural beauty and cultural heritage in a safe environment aligned with Islamic principles (Portal Rasmi Kerajaan Negeri Terengganu, 2024).

Kelantan, covering 1.5 million hectares with a population of 1.8 million, has Kota Bharu as its capital. Its culture is shaped by its tropical climate and rural lifestyle. Key attractions include Siti Khadijah Market, Gunung Stong State Park, and traditional arts like Dikir Barat and Wayang Kulit (Pusat Penerangan Pelancongan Negeri Kelantan, 2024).

Pahang, the third-largest state in Malaysia, spans 13,330,000 hectares with a population of 1.63 million. It

features the National Park, hill resorts like Cameron Highlands and Genting Highlands, and the highest peak in Peninsular Malaysia, Gunung Tahan. Tourists can also enjoy silk weaving and batik printing, with Cherating being a popular beach destination. Overall, the East Coast of Malaysia, with its rich cultural heritage and diverse attractions, is a significant contributor to the nation's tourism and economy (Tourism Pahang Darulmakmur, 2024).

The Significance of Culture in Attracting Tourist Arrivals to East Coast Malaysia

The states of Terengganu, Kelantan, and Pahang, located in eastern Peninsular Malaysia, share vast sandy beaches and tourist islands. Despite an increase in tourist arrivals, these states have not met expected growth levels. According to Che Haron (2017), Pahang is a standout, achieving the highest growth in tourism development and being the second-largest supplier of hotel rooms in Malaysia. Conversely, Terengganu and Kelantan contribute only 4.5% and 2.3% of Malaysia's total hotel rooms, respectively, and remain small players in the tourism industry.

Empirical evidences from Khairi & Darmawan (2021); Sakshi et al. (2020); Azimovna et al. (2022) and Che Haron (2017) suggests that facilities, infrastructure, strategies, culture, and policies significantly impact tourism. Cultural factors play a crucial role in influencing tourist arrivals in East Coast Malaysia. However, Che Haron (2017) highlights the necessity of successful cultural marketing strategies to attract tourists. On the other hand, ineffective cultural attraction strategies have resulted in lower tourist numbers in regions like Kuala Terengganu (Che Haron, 2017).

This research aims to explore the role of culture in attracting tourists and to compare how local and international tourists perceive cultural factors. Recognizing that international visitors often have higher service expectations and environmental concerns, this study will analyse the characteristics and expectations of both domestic and international visitors (Ponsignon et al., 2021). Understanding these differences is crucial for tailoring cultural attractions to meet diverse needs and leveraging culture effectively to enhance tourist arrivals in East Coast Malaysia

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding Tourism

tourism, encompassing travel for leisure, business, and other purposes, significantly impacts various sectors such as hospitality, transportation, and entertainment. It involves both outbound and inbound tourism, contributing to the global economy (Haron et al., 2023) The development of tourism typically progresses through five stages: Exploration, Involvement, Development, Consolidation, and Stagnation, each crucial for maintaining growth and appeal. Effective management of these stages ensures the sustainability and continued success of the tourism industry (Butler, 2024).

Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior, elaborated upon by Ajzen in 1991, posits that people's actions are guided by their beliefs and subjective evaluations of outcomes. According to Ulker-Demirel & Ciftci (2020), understanding visitors' needs and responses is crucial for influencing their behavior and effectively achieving management goals and this also supported by Che Haron et al. (2024). This theory is particularly relevant in the context of tourism, as it helps to identify how factors such as facilities, infrastructure, strategies, culture, and policies impact tourist arrivals. By applying the Theory of Planned Behavior, researchers and tourism operators can better understand and address cultural factors that influence visitor decisions. This approach fills a gap in the literature by emphasizing how cultural aspects can be leveraged to attract more tourists, particularly in East Coast Malaysia, and enhance the effectiveness of tourism management strategies (Che Haron, 2017).

Determinants of Tourist Arrivals

The key determinants in attracting tourists to East Coast Malaysia are the development of facilities and

infrastructure, strategic initiatives, cultural tourism, and effective policies. Firstly, comprehensive facilities and infrastructure, such as efficient transportation networks, utility services, and recreational amenities, are crucial for providing a seamless and enjoyable tourist experience, thereby enhancing the region's attractiveness (Khairi & Darmawan, 2021; Sakshi et al., 2020; Azimovna et al., 2022 and Che Haron, 2017).

Secondly, strategic initiatives like Blue Ocean Strategy demonstrate how innovative, high-impact, low-cost programs can significantly boost tourism competitiveness by quickly and effectively addressing industry needs (dos Santos Nogueira, 2021). Thirdly, cultural tourism plays a pivotal role in attracting visitors, as tourists are often drawn to destinations where they can immerse themselves in local cultures through observation and participation, which leads to sustained interest and repeat visits (Du Cros & McKercher, 2020). Lastly, effective policies create a favourable environment for tourism growth, particularly during periods of crisis. By targeting specific markets and balancing focus between high and low-demand destinations, these policies can stabilize and boost tourism demand, contributing to economic development and heritage preservation (Khan et al., 2020). Together, these factors provide a comprehensive framework that ensures East Coast Malaysia remains a competitive and attractive destination for tourists. In conclusion, facilities, infrastructures, strategies, cultures and policies are factors that influence tourists' arrival in the East Coast Malaysia.

The Significance of Cultures

Razak (2020) notes that tourists are particularly drawn to the authentic cultural experiences offered by native activities in Malaysia, such as those in Sarawak, where visitors appreciate the genuine engagement of locals in their daily routines. This aligns with observations by Chin et al. (2022), who found that tourists visiting longhouses in Sarawak were excited to see traditional cultural activities.

Cultural attractions significantly boost tourist arrivals and market segmentation. Cultural destinations in Europe saw a substantial increase in sales, with increment of tourists dedicating more time to cultural segment. Despite this, culture has often been overlooked as a key factor in destination choice plays a crucial role in decision-making, suggesting that its importance in tourism should be better recognized and prioritized (Škrabić Perić et al., 2021).

Cultural Activities

Cultural activities into various types, including heritage tourism (both natural and cultural), city cultural tourism, traditions and ethnic tourism, events and festivals, religious tourism, and creative culture. These include heritage sites, museums, artistic performances, and festivals. A significant number of tourists are attracted to cultural activities, as demonstrated by the 800,000 visitors to Sibiu, Romania, during its European Capital of Culture 2007 event where a 300% increase from the previous year (Che Haron, 2017). Seyfi et al. (2020) emphasizes that cultural activities enhance the tourist experience by showcasing local values and offering rich, engaging encounters. By continuously providing accessible cultural experiences, destinations can effectively attract and retain visitors.

Cultural Participation

Successful tourism depends on the active participation of stakeholders who promote cultural destinations. For example, Gamelan Music Festivals in Terengganu that attract global audiences due to effective promotion by operators (D'Cruz, 2020). In Bali, authorities encourage local engagement with tourists, which has helped boost tourism and develop cultural products (Rideng et al., 2020). Similarly, Aboriginal youth in Canada have leveraged their cultural heritage to engage in tourism, enhancing both cultural preservation and economic opportunities. Integrating local communities, NGOs, and governments into cultural integration tourism strategies is essential for attracting tourists to cultural destinations and ensuring sustainable development (Tang & Xu, 2023).

Cultural Incentives

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Tourism and Culture has established the Special Tourism Fund to support small

and medium-sized enterprises in developing or expanding tourism products. This fund is designed to enhance tourism-related projects located within Malaysia, including cultural shows, souvenir and craft centers, and museums. The aim is to contribute to the growth of the tourism industry by funding projects that promote Malaysian cultural heritage (Che Haron, 2017).

Similarly, in Bali, former the government leveraged cultural tourism to enhance the island's appeal by funding major cultural events such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata performances. Despite these efforts, challenges like infrastructure issues and waste management have been highlighted, prompting Bali authorities to collaborate with NGOs for environmental protection (Westoby et al., 2021). Additionally, the National Governors Association is an American political organization founded that advocates for state governments to support cultural enterprises through targeted incentives, such as investment in creative clusters and public-private partnerships (Che Haron, 2017).
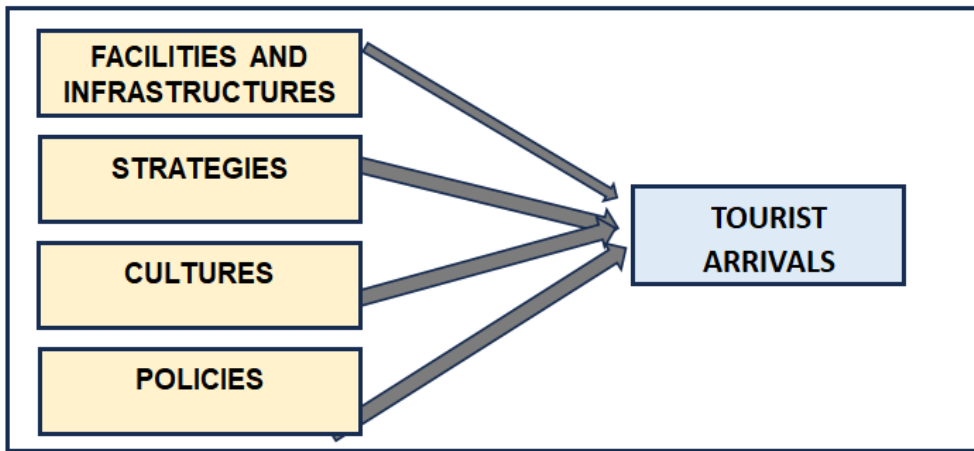
Research Framework

Figure 1: The research framework

METHADOLOGY

Research Design

The quantitative method is selected in this study due to its widespread use in the literature. Authors like Mohajan (2020); McNabb (2020); Clark et al. (2021); Che Haron et al. (2024) and Peek at al. (2020) have successfully applied quantitative methods. Advantages of the quantitative method, as highlighted by Mohajan (2020) include a broader study scope, greater objectivity and accuracy, summary of vast information sources, and avoidance of personal bias.

Population of the Study

The study population includes tourists in Terengganu, Pahang, and Kelantan on the East Coast of Malaysia. Given the impracticality of studying the entire population due to time and resource constraints, a sample is used. Sin et al. (2019) and Haron et. (2023) identified a gap in hotel industry studies in Malaysia, and prompting suggest this survey's focus on hotels. The 3-star and above rating list from The Ministry of Tourism Malaysia was used and as result, 16 hotels from Terengganu, Pahang, and Kelantan were selected for population of study:

Table 1: List of Selected Hotels (3 Stars Above)

No.	Terengganu	Pahang	Kelantan
1	Permai Park Inn K Trg	Vistana Kuantan	Grand Riverview

2	Primula K.Trg	MS Garden Kuantan	Renaissance hotel
3	Redang Beach Resort	Shahzan Inn	Crystal Lodge
4	Tanjung Jara Resort	Holliday villa Cherating	Holiday Villa Hotel
5	Seri Malaysia K.Terengganu	Grand Continental Kuantan	Pacific hotel Kelantan
6	Perhentian Redang Terminal		

Source: Che Haron (2017)

Table 2: Summary Population of the Study

No	States	Population ('000)	Percentage (%)	Sample size
1	Terengganu	4,899,502	23%	89
2	Pahang	11,500,000	53%	203
3	Kelantan	5,300,000	24%	92
	Total	21,699,502	100%	

Source: Department Statistic of Malaysia (2017)

Sample Size

Sample size affects the estimation of sample error and the model's accuracy (Lakens, 2022). According to Sekaran (2003), determining sample size depends on the study's objectives, financial resources, time limitations, and the nature of the problem. Roscoe (1975) suggests a minimum sample size of 30 and less than 500. Sekaran (2003) states no calculations are needed for defined bounded size populations.

The total tourist population for Terengganu, Pahang, and Kelantan was 21,699,502. Therefore, a sample size of 384 was determined to be representative, with two additional questionnaires added to account for deficiencies, resulting in a total sample size of 386. The sample size is distributed across states according to their percentage contribution to the total population (Sekaran, 2003).

Sampling Technique

The study used a stratified random sampling technique to accurately represent the population of tourists' arrivals. This technique involves dividing the population into different strata and drawing random samples from each stratum. The percentage from each state's population was calculated, and the total sample for each state was derived accordingly. Stratified random sampling ensures every unit in the population has an equal chance of selection, reducing bias and increasing efficiency (Nguyen et al., 2021; Che Haron et al., 2024). Steps in random sampling include:

i. Selecting the target population.

ii. Creating a sampling frame from tourists staying in 3-star and above hotels in Terengganu, Pahang, and Kelantan.

iii. Numbering each population element.

iv. Using random numbers to select the sample, ensuring unbiased selection.

Research Instrument

The study utilized a survey questionnaire divided into six sections. Section A gathered general socio-demographic information, including sex, age, and nationality. Section B collected data on tourist arrivals, expectations, frequency, and revisit. Section C assessed facilities and infrastructure, focusing on accommodation quality, transportation, recreational activities, and tourist information services. Section D explored tourists' expectations concerning tourism strategies, plans, and promotions, drawing. Section E examined tourists' expectations of local culture, including customs, performances, crafts, and traditions. Section F addressed opinions on policies, legislation, free trade policy, and tourism governance. The research instruments will be distributed in both Malay and English languages for local and foreigner tourists.

Data Analysis

The study uses SPSS for statistical analysis, including generating reports, descriptive statistics, and complex analyses. Techniques include Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) for validity and data reduction, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) for factor loadings and correlations, independent sample t-tests for group comparisons, reliability tests for construct measurement, and normality tests for data distribution. Additionally, AMOS software is employed for Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to assess relationships between latent constructs and moderating effects. SEM, as noted by Hair Jr et al. (2021) integrates quantitative data with correlational or causal assumptions, facilitating CFA, regression analysis, path analysis, and modeling of variable inter-relationships.

Reliability Analysis for the Constructs in the Study

The reliability analysis is aimed at measuring the items under each of the constructs. The most common measure of reliability is the Cronbach's Alpha. Usually, Cronbach's Alpha of 0.6 or higher for a component reflects that the measuring items under that component provide a reliable measure of internal consistency (Park, 2021).

As depicted in Table 8, the study presents the computed Cronbach's Alpha for each construct with total values of the Cronbach's Alpha (0.943). Equally, Cronbach's Alpha for each of the constructs of tourists' arrivals, facilities and infrastructures, strategies, cultures and policies are 0.879, 0.922, 0.884, 0.885, and 0.750 respectively. Fortunately, all the reliability measures have exceeded 0.6, the cut-off value, meaning the constructs are reliable and suitable for further analysis. These items were then further validated using CFA.

Table 3: Reliability Statistics for the Constructs

Section	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
Tourists' Arrivals	0.879	0.879	4
Facilities and Infrastructures	0.922	0.924	6
Strategies	0.884	0.883	4
Cultures	0.885	0.886	5
Policies	0.750	0.749	4
Total	0.943	0.943	23

The output for cultures equally indicated that the factor analysis procedure has made an extraction of one dimension with given values exceeding 1.0 which overtly explains that the items are thus grouped and extracted in one dimension. Therefore, the data is reliable for further analysis. Details in the Table 9:

Table 4: Total Variance Explained for Cultures

Factor	Total	Initial Eigenvalues % of Variance	Cumulative %	Extraction Total	Sums of Squared % of Variance	Cumulative %
1	3.440	68.795	68.795	3.055	61.106	61.106
2	.518	10.366	79.161			
3	.428	8.557	87.718			
4	.364	7.277	94.994			
5	.250	5.006	100.000			

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

Confirmatory factor analysis is a process that analyses constructs or measurement models to assess how well the generated items represent their underlying constructs. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is conducted after successful completion of the exploratory factor analysis (EFA).

The New Factor Loadings After Deletion and Multi-Collection

After examining the factor loadings, it was found that the factor loadings for item F3 is 0.532 which is below 0.6, thus affects the constructs and make it defective as well as not fit. Therefore, to achieve the minimum value of 0.6, these items were deleted. Thus, after deletion of the items in the construct, the factor loadings improved as all the fitness indexes indicated a perfect model fit as indicated in Figure 3.
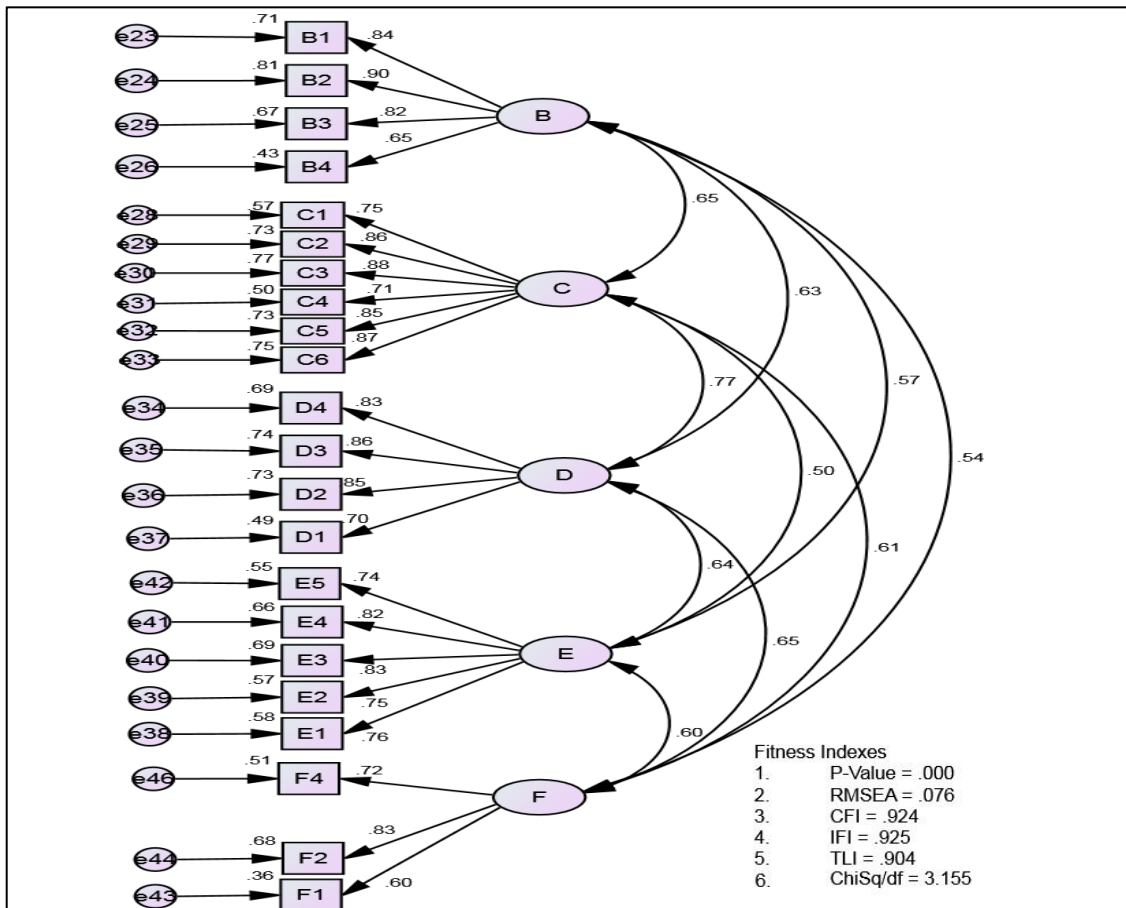

Figure 3: The new factor loadings after deletion and multi-collection

Assessing Validity and Reliability for a Pooled Measurement Model

Thus, after the conducting CFA procedure for every measurement model, the next step is to compute certain measures to assess the validity and reliability of the constructs which are summarized in a Table 5. The relationship between the variables, strength of their effects on the relationship and also their significance values are depicted in Table 15 below. As described, the results of the Beta estimate for facilities and infrastructures is (ß= 0.235, p< .01), for strategies (ß=0.182, p< .01), for cultures (ß=0.282, p< .01) and for policies (ß= 0.187, p< .01).

Table 5: The standardized multiple regression weights for the relationships and direct effect of facilities and infrastructure, strategies, cultures and policies towards tourists' arrivals

Constructs	Path	Construct	Estimateβ	S.E.	C.R.	P-Value	Result
Tourist Arrivals	<---	Cultures	0.282	0.052	5.455	***	Significant
Tourist Arrivals	<---	Policies	0.187	0.07	2.681	***	Significant
Tourist Arrivals	<---	Facilities and Infrastructure	0.235	0.028	8.354	***	Significant
Tourist Arrivals	<---	Strategies	0.182	0.053	3.421	***	Significant

After analyzing the influence in the structural equation modelling, it was found that facilities, infrastructure, strategies, cultures, and policies significantly affect tourist arrivals. Therefore, all four constructs have been identified as factors influencing the number of tourist arrivals in East Coast Malaysia.

Interestingly, culture emerged as the most significant factor, with the highest Beta estimate value of ß=0.282 (refer to Table 5).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Most Significant Factor That Effect on Tourist Arrival

Consequently, the empirical findings of the study revealed that culture is the most significant factor affecting tourist arrivals in East Coast Malaysia, with the highest Beta estimate value of ß=0.282. Facilities and infrastructure follow with a Beta estimate value of ß=0.235, policies with ß=0.187, and strategies with the lowest Beta estimate value of ß=0.182.

This finding aligns with previous research by Bayrakcı & Ozcan (2023) that stated the significant limitations of economic models is the exclusion of fundamental variables such as cultural factors. Without these elements, the models remain incomplete, resulting in less reliable outcomes. Cultural differences substantially influence economic decisions, making it essential to consider cultural factors in tourism demand modelling. Cultural distance, which examines the impact on tourist behaviour, is a crucial aspect of this analysis. Tourists often show a keen interest in unique cultures, viewing them as a compelling reason to travel. Consequently, policymakers should devise strategies to convert cultural differences from a disadvantage into an advantage

Cultural events and festivals are pivotal in shaping the global cultural tourism landscape. This article explores the diverse impacts of these events on cultural tourism across economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions. They serve as significant catalysts for cultural tourism, providing unique experiences that attract tourists and enhance the identity and vibrancy of local communities. Moreover, cultural events and festivals contribute to tourism development and community well-being, highlighting the challenges and opportunities of sustainable management (Lopes, 2024).

Practical Contributions

The practical implications of the study are directed towards major players in the tourism industry, including

hotel managers, researchers, the government, and other regulatory bodies in Malaysia. The findings provide guidance for tourism operators to plan their package holidays, for hotel managers to meet competitive requirements, and for the government to develop relevant policies. These actions aim to enhance the cultural experience for both local and foreign tourists in East Coast Malaysia, helping the region achieve a competitive advantage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study recommend several actions to improve and sustain the tourism industry in East Coast Malaysia. The high interest in cultural attractions among local and foreign tourists underscores the need for targeted initiatives to enhance these offerings.

Revival of Cultural Heritage Skills

Many cultural tourism products in East Coast Malaysia have become extinct, such as the superior skill in building boats and ships by the people in Kuala Terengganu (Che Haron, 2017). To revive this heritage, tourism players in Terengganu can organize sailboat races and boat carving arts festivals, reminiscent of those held in the early 1980s.

Private Sector Involvement

The government should encourage private sector involvement in promoting tourism products in East Coast Peninsular Malaysia. Private sector initiatives could include integrating local cultural products into national mapping and launching a "must-visit" strategy, where tourists are guided to key attractions in the region. Additionally, bloggers should be motivated to promote East Coast Malaysia, generating global awareness.

Government Support and Infrastructure Development

The government can also assist by involving university students in cultural community experiences and requiring visits to historical sites and museums. Improving public transportation, particularly in rural areas rich in tourism potential, is crucial for providing convenient access to cultural destinations.

Enhancing Cultural Attractions

"Back to basic" cultural attractions, such as traditional arts activities, lively night markets, and the authenticity of East Coast culture (Che Haron, 2017), have great potential to attract visitors. Government authorities should embellish these elements to enhance tourism appeal. To address the lack of late-night activities, authorities and local entrepreneurs could consider engage with community and implement arts and culture exhibition programs (Terengganu's Carfood Sahur event for example).

Promote Cultural Festivals Internationally

Launching comprehensive global marketing campaigns is crucial to highlight East Coast Malaysia's major cultural festivals and events. These campaigns should leverage various platforms, including social media channels like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, to reach a broad audience. Engaging content such as videos, photos, and live streams of festivals can capture the essence of these cultural experiences. Additionally, collaborating with travel blogs and influencers to share firsthand accounts and reviews can attract international tourists. Participation in international travel fairs is also essential, as it provides a platform to showcase these festivals to travel industry professionals and potential tourists from around the world.

CONCLUSIONS

This study underscores the pivotal role of cultural factors in attracting tourists to East Coast Malaysia, specifically in the states of Terengganu, Kelantan, and Pahang. Despite the region's natural beauty and cultural richness, tourist arrivals have not met expected growth levels, with Terengganu and Kelantan contributing minimally to the national hotel room supply. Empirical evidence highlights the significant impact of facilities,

infrastructure, strategies, culture, and policies on tourism, with culture emerging as the most influential factor. The Theory of Planned Behavior provides a framework for understanding how tourists' beliefs and subjective evaluations influence their decisions, emphasizing the importance of addressing cultural factors in tourism management.

Cultural attractions significantly boost tourist arrivals and market segmentation. For instance, cultural destinations in Europe have seen substantial increases in tourist numbers, dedicating more time to the cultural segment. Despite this, culture has often been overlooked as a key factor in destination choice. The study's findings indicate that culture is the most significant factor affecting tourist arrivals in East Coast Malaysia, with a Beta estimate value of ß=0.282, followed by facilities and infrastructure (ß=0.235), policies (ß=0.187), and strategies (ß=0.182). This highlights the necessity of integrating cultural elements into tourism strategies to attract more visitors.

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