

Experiential Competitiveness in Heritage Tourism: A Conceptual Review

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ABSTRACT

The post-pandemic tourism environment has intensified competition among destinations and transformed the factors that influence tourism success. While traditional tourism competitiveness has often been evaluated through visitor arrivals, tourism receipts, and market share, contemporary tourists increasingly prioritise meaningful, authentic, and satisfying experiences. Consequently, heritage tourism destinations must shift from attraction-based competition towards experience-centred strategies that encourage long-term visitor loyalty and revisit behaviour. This article presents a conceptual review of experiential destination competitiveness within the context of heritage tourism in Penang, Malaysia. Drawing upon Destination Image Theory (DIT) and Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT), the article examines how gastronomy experience, cultural heritage, service quality, and destination image contribute to tourist revisit intention through the mediating role of tourist satisfaction. Through a synthesis of tourism literature and empirical evidence, the study argues that experiential competitiveness is fundamentally a satisfaction-driven process in which integrated destination experiences influence behavioural outcomes. The article proposes an Experiential Destination Competitiveness Framework that positions tourist satisfaction as the central mechanism linking destination experiences to revisit intention. The findings highlight the importance of experience integration, expectation fulfilment, and visitor retention as strategic priorities for heritage tourism destinations. The study contributes to tourism literature by extending destination competitiveness research beyond traditional economic indicators and offers practical insights for destination managers and policymakers seeking to strengthen long-term competitiveness in increasingly demanding tourism markets.

Keywords: Experiential competitiveness; Heritage tourism; Tourist satisfaction; Revisit intention; Destination image; Gastronomy experience; Penang

INTRODUCTION

Post-Pandemic Tourism Competition and the Shift Toward Experiential Competitiveness

The tourism sector has undergone much change around the world since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. International tourism is now largely back on track, but it is becoming more competitive, experience-based and satisfaction-focused in the post-pandemic world. The traditional destination competitiveness models, centred on tourism arrivals and receipts, and on promoting destinations, are being undermined by the evolution of tourist expectations and behaviours (World Travel & Tourism Council [WTTC], 2024). Tourists today look for authentic, meaningful and memorable experiences; experiential quality is a competitive edge of a tourist destination.

In particular, this shift may be of significance for the competitiveness of heritage tourism destinations, where the availability of tourism facilities plays a role but also the quality of cultural and emotional experiences provided to tourists. As stated by Kolar & Žabkar (2010) and Dorokhov et al. (2023), the demand of the visitors

for authenticity, experiential engagement and cultural meaning are growing, and they are also getting higher demands for the reliability of the services, their credibility of the destination and the quality of their experiences. Therefore, it is possible for destinations to have many tourism assets and still not be able to provide coherent and satisfying experiences, and thus remain uncompetitive in the long term.

The drawbacks of growth in tourism based on arrival numbers are growing ever more apparent. Many destinations have been able to recover visitor numbers after the pandemic, but not necessarily repeat visitation and destination loyalty has not matched the level of recovery (UN Tourism, 2025). Consequently, researchers have tried to expand the discussion on destination competitiveness beyond economic indicators to incorporate behavioural measures like tourist satisfaction, loyalty and revisit intention (Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Nguyen Huu et al., 2024). Repeat visitors are especially important as they tend to have greater destination attachment, lesser price sensitivity and higher spending efficiency when compared to initial visitors (Baker & Crompton, 2000).

In this context, the concept of experiential competitiveness has become an important strategic concept. Experiential competitiveness is the ability of a destination to provide a good tourism experience that is integrated and memorable, and that stands out from other destinations in order to elicit positive behavioural responses (Chen & Chen, 2010). Experiential competitiveness highlights the collective impact of tourism experiences on tourists' perceptions and satisfaction, in contrast to other approaches to competitiveness that have been developed, which only consider infrastructure and marketing performance. Gastronomy experiences, cultural heritage, service quality and destination image are some of the key experiential dimensions that are usually mentioned in tourism literature.

Penang is a fitting environment to explore the experiential competitiveness in heritage tourism. Penang is one of the biggest tourism hubs in Malaysia, which is recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, rich in multiculturalism and a world famous gastronomy tourism identity. As a result of its historical and cultural importance, as well as Penang's food reputation, George Town has a good tourism appeal (Ferdhaus et al., 2023). However, due to the growing competition from other local tourist destinations and considerations about service quality, heritage commodification and tourism sustainability, it is important to understand the role of experiential attributes in the satisfaction of tourists and revisit intention (Woo & Khoo, 2023).

Gastronomy experience, cultural heritage, service quality, and destination image are the factors that were found to be important in determining tourist revisit intention in previous studies (Hamid et al., 2021; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022). However, previous studies tend to investigate these variables separately from each other or as single items in a wider conceptualization of experiential competitiveness. Also, the mechanism by which experiential attributes affect revisit behaviour – namely tourist satisfaction – has received very little research attention.

In this context, this conceptual review discusses experiential competitiveness from a post-pandemic perspective on Penang's heritage tourism. Based on Destination Image Theory (DIT) and Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT), the article suggests that the impact of gastronomy experience, cultural heritage, service quality and destination image on revisit intention is mediated by tourist satisfaction. The study brings these aspects together in an integrated perspective, offering a contribution to the tourism literature, which redefines revisit intention as a strategic indicator of the competitiveness of experience and the success of the destination in the medium and long term.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS: EXPERIENTIAL COMPETITIVENESS IN HERITAGE TOURISM

The post-pandemic tourism landscape has completely changed the way destinations are competing for tourism. In the past, destination competitiveness has been measured by the number of tourists, the amount of tourism receipts and the market share of the destination, but current tourism studies have pointed to the importance of the quality of the tourists' experiences and the process of their journey, which shape competitiveness (Stylidis, 2022; WTTC, 2024). Increasingly, tourists are choosing their destinations with their experience goals in mind and competing destinations have to get beyond the competition over attractions and start to develop a more integrated experiential value that would lead to satisfaction, emotional attachment and behavioural loyalty.

Experiential competitiveness plays a crucial role in the tourism of heritage destinations; in addition to physical attractiveness, visitors consider a destination as authentic and culturally engaging, and they seek emotional satisfaction. The advantage of the heritage destinations is the fact that they are able to convert cultural resources, historical assets, local traditions, and destination experiences into tourism experiences that are meaningful and distinguish themselves from other competing destinations (Kolar & Žabkar, 2010). In the increasingly competitive tourism markets, the quality of experience has emerged as a more sustainable basis for competitiveness than in the past, when competitiveness was based on promotional activity or on infrastructure development alone.

The conceptual underpinning of experiential competitiveness is elaborated in this section through the discussion of the role of experiential resources at the destination, the strategic value of tourist satisfaction and the combination of theoretical approaches to explain the contribution of destination experiences to revisit intention in heritage tourism contexts.

Experience-Based Competition in Post-Pandemic Tourism

In the post-COVID-19 era, tourism competition is shifting towards experiential. Global travel restrictions have forced a major shift in the way tourists experience travel, favouring experiences that are more authentic, reliable, meaningful and value-driven (UN Tourism, 2025). Now tourists are looking for places that can provide them with memories and/or meanings that are worth their travel investment, instead of destinations that offer attractions or price advantages.

With the advent of the experience economy, this change has gained momentum. Pine and Gilmore (1999) suggested that consumers are increasingly interested in experiences as unique economic products that have emotional, personal and remembering effects. In the tourism field, destinations are experiential ecosystems that are the result of a set of interactions which together form tourists' perceptions and evaluations. These interactions involve gastronomy experiences, culture, service interactions, destination atmosphere, and symbolic destination meanings.

Tourism destinations with successful integration of these experiential elements have a better chance of creating sustainable competitive advantages in the post-pandemic market. The number of attractions is not the only factor that makes a tourist successful at the competition, but it's also the quality and coherence of experiences that are delivered throughout the tourist journey. Therefore, the experiential competitiveness has become a strategic competency that is necessary for the tourist destinations willing to be relevant and differentiated in the more and more competitive environment.

This shift is especially important for heritage places. The heritage tourists tend to be interested in experiences that go beyond the physical, offering opportunities to engage with and understand local culture, history, and identity (Bitušiková, 2021). Thus, competitiveness is related to the ability of destinations to develop relevant experiences based on heritage resources, which evokes emotions and leads to favorable impressions of the destination.

Tourist Satisfaction as a Competitive Mechanism

While experiential attributes are important in determining destination attractiveness, recent tourism research has indicated that experiences do not necessarily lead to revisit intention. In contrast, tourists judge their experiences by an overall satisfaction mechanism that leads to future behavioral intentions (Nguyen Huu et al., 2024; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022).

Tourist satisfaction is the general appraisal of the judgment made by tourists when evaluating whether the expectations they have when visiting the destination are met or not (Oh et al., 2022). This evaluative process involves more than just the assessment of the service involved in each encounter, and it is a part of tourists' overall assessment of their travel experience. Thus, tourist satisfaction acts as an enabling tool that helps to convert experiential resources into behavioural results.

Competitiveness is more than an outcome variable; satisfy is one of its components. It is a strategic measure to assess the success of destination branding in turning experiential into positive evaluations from tourists. High levels of satisfaction are more likely to lead to repeat visits, positive communication and destination loyalty in the long-term to destinations that have consistently high satisfaction scores (Baker & Crompton, 2000).

Especially in the context of heritage tourism contexts. The emotional, symbolic and cultural experiences of heritages are not easily measured in terms of quality. Tourists judge the quality of a place for providing an authentic, meaningful and enjoyable experience which meets their tourism expectations. If expectations are met or exceeded, satisfaction is created, thereby increasing the chance of revisit intention.

In this sense, tourist satisfaction can be considered as a competitive process connecting destination performance with destination experiences over a timeframe. Instead of competing on the basis of attractions or promotional activities, destinations are now competing on the basis of their ability to meet tourist expectations in a reliable way on various experiential dimensions.

Integrating Destination Image Theory and Expectation Confirmation Theory

The theoretical framework should be capable of explaining the process of destination experience evaluation and translation into behavioral outcomes in the context of experiential competitiveness. The Destination Image Theory (DIT) and Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT) are used as complements to explore the relationship between experiential competitiveness and tourist revisit intention.

In Destination Image theory, the tourists build their perception of the destination through the cognitive and affective perception of the destination attributes, experiences and symbols (Beerli & Martín, 2004). Such perceptions can affect destination choice, assessment of the destination's satisfaction and behavioral intentions after visiting. In the context of heritage tourism, destination image is constructed with gastronomy, cultural heritage, service quality, and overall destination atmosphere.

Complementary explanation comes from the Expectation Confirmation Theory which explains how the tourists appraise their visitation based on their pre-visit expectations (Shukla et al., 2024). The concept of satisfaction is created when experiences match or surpass expectations, which leads to dissatisfaction when experiences do not meet expectations, according to ECT. This evaluative process then affects the behavioural outcomes like revisit intention and loyalty.

Combined, DIT and ECT give a complete account of experiential competitiveness. Expectation Destinations influence and influence the tourists' perceptions of experience quality, and the experience quality is determined by the expectation confirmation. In this regard, tourist satisfaction acts as the mediation mechanism for the impact of experiential competitiveness on revisit intention. Accordingly, tourist satisfaction becomes the mediation mechanism between experiential competitiveness and revisit intention.

At least, this holistic approach questions the sole importance of merely available tourist resources for the competitiveness of a tourist destination. Instead, competitiveness relies on a destination's ability to develop and deliver experiences that is consistently aligned and meets the expectations of tourists. Gastronomy experiences, cultural heritage engagement, service quality and destination image are the factors that together can foster experiential competitiveness in the context of heritage destinations like Penang, which influences satisfaction and repeat visitation.

Based on this, experiential competitiveness can be defined as a process that creates satisfaction, which then evolves into behavioural loyalty, as a result of the effect of destination perceptions and expectation confirmation.

Empirical Evidence Base

There are strong empirical evidences in the tourism literature supporting the concept of experiential competitiveness, especially in the heritage tourism destinations. The findings of previous studies have consistently shown that tourists no longer consider just the attractions, accessibility or promotional appeal of a

destination. However, tourists evaluate destinations based on their overall experiences, which are created by the combined effect of other experiential attributes such as gastronomy, cultural heritage, service quality and destination image (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022; Stylidis, 2022). The experiential assessments in turn contribute to tourist satisfaction and behavioural results like loyalty and retrip intention.

The strategic importance of gastronomy and cultural heritage as competitive destination resources has been pointed out in research carried out in heritage tourism contexts. Tourists can get a taste of the local culture during gastronomy experiences by experiencing the destination through the senses and feelings, which helps to make their perceptions more authentic and unique (Kivela & Crotts, 2006). In the same way, cultural heritage adds to the differentiation of a destination by providing it with historical significance, cultural identity and meaningful experiences that are hardly replaceable by other destinations (Kolar & Žabkar, 2010). The findings from those studies show positive correlations between these experiential qualities and tourist satisfaction, meaning that gastronomic and heritage qualities are a better asset to build memorable tourism experiences.

In addition to gastronomy and cultural heritage, destination image and service quality have been recognized as key factors for destination competitiveness. The quality of service is a factor that affects tourists' evaluations of reliability, professionalism, and the overall consistency of their experience, and destination image affects the expectations before visiting the destination and perception of the experience after visiting the destination (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Abdou et al., 2022). These are amplified in a post-COVID context, where customers are more focused on safety, service reliability, and experiential value in their evaluation of a travel destination.

However, empirical evidence in recent times suggests that experiential attributes are not necessarily directly influencing revisit intention. Rather, it is now studies that point at the importance of tourists' satisfaction as the main mediator between tourists' experiences in a destination and their behavioural consequences (Nguyen Huu et al., 2024; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022). Gastronomy, heritage attractions, service quality and destination image can be viewed positively by tourists but these are not likely to create revisit intention unless they would result in overall satisfaction with the destination experience. This discovery implies that destination competitiveness can not just equate to having attractive tourist resources, but also relies on the degree to which these resources are able to meet tourist expectations and generate positive experiential evaluations.

This satisfaction oriented pattern is more visible in heritage tourism places. Heritage tourists are usually looking for authentic, meaningful and culturally enriching experiences. As a result, they tend to make their revisit decisions on a more global basis than destination attributes. In previous studies, the satisfaction dimension consistently has been found to be the most powerful determinant of revisit intention and destination loyalty when studying the visitation of UNESCO World Heritage Sites (Hamid et al., 2021). The results are in line with the idea that tourist satisfaction serves as a strategic link between experiential resources and destination competitiveness and future.

This relationship is relevant as seen in the example of Penang. Penang is a gastronomic, cultural and UNESCO World Heritage Centre, and has many experiential values that make it attractive to tourists. However, it takes more than these resources to be competitive. The long-term success will depend on the destination's capacity to convert experiences into satisfying tourism experiences that will result in repeat visits. In a highly competitive post-pandemic tourism market, the destinations that effectively use gastronomy experiences, cultural heritage, customer service and destination image as a combined and seamless customer experience are more likely to improve customer satisfaction and the willingness of tourists to re-visit these destinations.

In general, the empirical evidence suggests that experiential competitiveness is indeed a satisfaction-based process. Although destination attributes are still relevant tools for gaining competitive advantage, they only become important when they contribute to tourist satisfaction. From this viewpoint, it is possible to build an understanding of the impact of experiential competitiveness on revisiting intention, which also holds significance for the satisfaction as a key mechanism in a heritage tourism destination.

Strategic Interpretation: Rethinking Destination Competitiveness Through Experience Integration

The empirical evidence analyzed in this article reveals that the complexity of destination competitiveness in the post-pandemic tourism context cannot be analysed merely based on their past performance on traditional indicators, like the volume of visitors, the tourism revenue generated or their promotional success. These are still relevant as key indicators of tourism performance, but do not offer much information on whether destinations can create long-term loyalty and repeat visits from tourists. The results presented in this article suggest that the competitiveness of a destination is now becoming more and more defined by its capability of providing an integrated package that meets tourists' expectations and stimulate them to revisit the destination in the future.

Historically, destination management approaches have basically centered on the promotion of the individual destination's attributes. Heritage sites, food, cultural events and iconic places are often heavily marketed as individual, competitive assets. These could work for initial visitors but not necessarily for subsequent visitors. Travelers today make overall destination judgments based on the totality of their experiences, rather than on destination attributes. Thus today, the competitiveness is mainly determined by the way the various experiences combine to form a coherent and satisfying tourist offering.

This change reflects the need to consider experience integration as a strategic destination capability. Experience integration is the integration of several aspects of tourism like gastronomy, cultural heritage, service quality, destination image into a tourism experience. These elements are not separate, but rather work together to affect tourists' perceptions of value, authenticity, and satisfaction. If experiences are used in a way that fits them appropriately, tourists will feel a sense of uniqueness, trust in the destination and a desire to return. In contrast, it is possible for satisfaction to be low when each of the individual destination attributes is rated highly but the experiences are disconnected.

In this context, the importance of tourist satisfaction becomes greater. Experiential attributes have consistently been shown to positively affect revisit intention via satisfaction. This result indicates that satisfaction should not be considered as a tourism consumption output anymore. Rather, satisfaction should be treated as a strategic performance measure and be a metric of the effectiveness of destination experience management. A high satisfaction level of tourists proves that destinations have succeeded in matching tourism products with tourists' expectations, and thus increased the competitive position of the destination.

This view has implications for tourism destinations based on the concept of heritage. Heritage places may have important cultural assets, historical attractions and local character which add to the tourism value. But, these resources are not enough to be competitive. The tourists are looking more and more for authenticity and meaningfulness, engaging cultural resources emotionally and providing good service. For this reason, heritage destinations are no longer limited to preservation and promotion but now have to shift to experience orchestration, where the visitor experience is coherent, authentic and satisfying during the entire duration of their visit.

With the case of Penang as an example, it reveals the strategic dilemma. The UNESCO World Heritage status, multicultural heritage, famous gastronomy and reputation for tourism are among Penang's competitive strengths. However, there is a growing competition between the regional destinations including Bali, Phuket and Singapore, and destination competitiveness cannot be achieved solely by relying on attraction diversity and destination recognition. Rather, Penang's competitiveness in the long-term relies on its ability to turn these resources into "integrated experiences" that continually compete and delight visitors and reattract them to return.

Moreover, the post-pandemic tourism environment has further emphasized the need for experiential reliability. tourists are more cautious in their travel decision and more sensitive towards the gaps between their expectation and performance, overcrowding and inconsistencies in services. Places with good tourism resources that don't provide tourism experiences that match their image risk being dissatisfied. Therefore, it is becoming more important to maintain alignment between destination promises and visitor experiences, in order to be more competitive.

The strategic interpretation implies a basic change in the priorities of destination management. The focus of tourism stakeholders should not only be on acquiring visitors and promoting the destination, but also integrating the experiences, managing expectations, and ensuring satisfaction. This makes revisit intention more than just a behavioural result; it can also be a measure of destination competitiveness and the sustainability of tourism.

Finally, experiential competitiveness can be defined as a process that converts destination experiences into visitor loyalty in the context of satisfaction. The destinations, which are able to combine gastronomy experiences, cultural heritage, service quality and the image of the destination in a coherent tourism experience, will have a higher chance of being competitively sustainable in the increasingly turbulent tourism markets. This helps to build a policy and managerial base to optimize the performance of destinations in the context of experience-centred tourism development.

Policy Implications for Penang and Heritage Tourism Destinations

The conclusions and strategic understanding provided in this article are of relevance to tourism policy makers, destination management organisations (DMOs) and heritage tourism stakeholders. The policy frameworks with a growth focus should be shifted to prioritizing experience management, visitor satisfaction and visitor retention as key determinants, and not just the number of visitors, as destinations are competing more and more based on the quality of their tourism experiences.

In many tourist destinations, the success continues to be assessed on the basis of tourist arrivals, tourism expenditure and hotel occupancy rate. These are all useful measures of the economic performance, but they give little information on the quality of the tourist experience or the probability of subsequent visits. The tourism competitiveness in the post-pandemic world more and more relies on the capacity to meet tourists' expectations and stimulate their long-term behavioural loyalty in the destination. Therefore, destination satisfaction metrics should also be included in tourism policies in addition to the traditional economic ones, so that a more holistic picture of destination success can be achieved.

Especially for Penang, this policy shift will be relevant. Penang is one of the top tourist destinations in Malaysia, showing robust recovery from the pandemic by attracting more visitors and driving more tourism. But a long-term competitive position is not achieved by merely keeping visitors coming. It is important for policy makers to ensure that the development strategies for tourism are based on experiential quality, cultural authenticity, and service consistency to support tourist satisfaction and revisit intention. This aligns with the overall goals for tourism sustainability and is a strategy to ensure that Penang becomes a cultural destination that provides quality tourism experiences to visitors.

The results also indicate the need for a more integrated approach to the management of destinations in tourism governance. Gastronomy, cultural heritage, service quality and destination image are just some of the dimensions that impact experiential competitiveness. The dimensions can be handled by different stakeholders and agencies, which can lead to fragmentation in tourism planning and implementation. In order to increase competitiveness, tourism authorities should foster increased cooperation between the government, tourism and hospitality operators, heritage organisations and communities. This can help to align and tighten the tourism experience in the destination.

In addition, heritage management policies are critical in preserving the experiential competitiveness. Many heritage places are grappling more and more with overcrowding, commercialisation and the maintenance of cultural integrity. Although tourism development can bring economic gains, too much commercialization can have negative consequences on the authenticity which brings visitors in the first place. Hence, heritage tourism policies must be able to combine the growth of tourists with cultural preservation and ensure that the tourism activities will continue to provide meaningful and authentic experiences. Conservation of cultural identity and cultural heritage resources is important not only for conservation but also for providing the experiential value that is one of the factors contributing to tourist satisfaction.

In addition, as tourist satisfaction becomes more and more relevant, systematic monitoring of the destination and feedback mechanisms become necessary. Tourism authorities should go beyond ad hoc surveys of visitors, and

set up ongoing systems to evaluate tourist experiences, satisfaction and repeat-visit intentions. This information may help identify what visitors are expecting and if there is any aspect of the site that needs improvement. A data-driven approach to destination management enables policymakers to better adapt to evolving tourist preferences and boost destination competitiveness as a whole.

With reference to the competitive context in which Penang is placed, it is even more important to have experience-centred tourism policies. The region's destinations, including Bali, Phuket, and Singapore continue to invest heavily in innovation, destination branding and experience development. In this increasingly competitive world, places that only have what they have already built, or gained their reputation through history, may find it difficult to hold their ground. The competitiveness of Penang in the future will rely on its ability to continually improve the experience for visitors, and to maintain the island's distinctive cultural and culinary offerings over its competitors.

Finally, the policy implications in this article are grounded in a general transition from a policy of growth in tourism development to destination management for experiences. Improving the quality of experience, tourist satisfaction and visitors' retention in and around heritage sites could also enhance competitiveness and help to foster more sustainable and resilient tourism. However, this can be a feasible way to secure long-term tourism success for Penang and other heritage destinations in the post-pandemic tourism era.

CONCEPTUAL STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

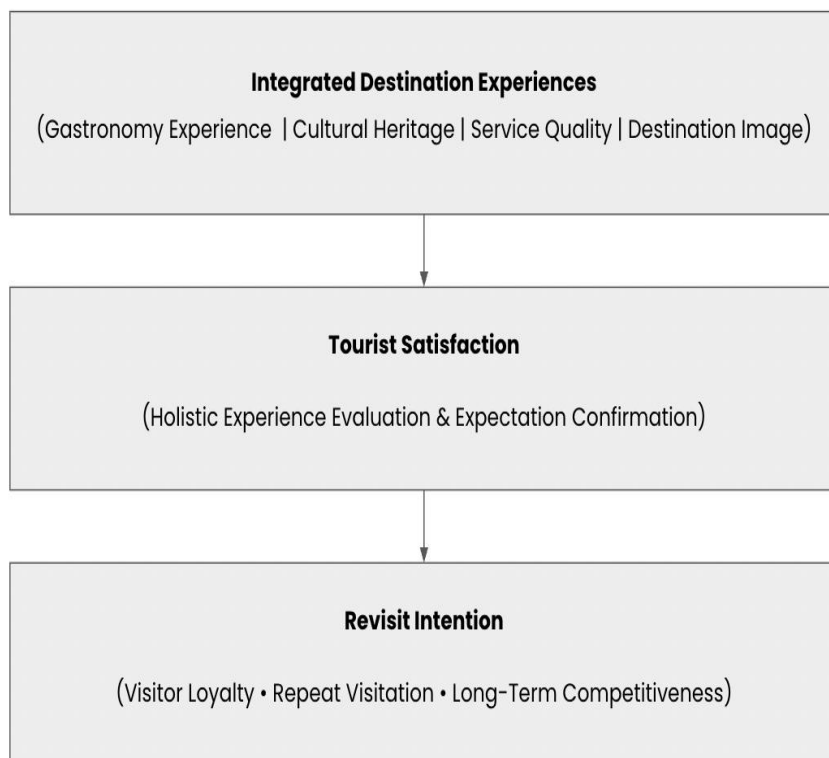


Figure 1: Experiential Destination Competitiveness Framework

The proposed Experiential Destination Competitiveness Framework (as a synthesis of tourism literature and conceptual arguments presented in this article) is provided in Figure 1. The framework prioritizes the role of integrated destination experiences as main drivers of experiential competitiveness in heritage tourism destinations. In particular, gastronomy experience, cultural heritage, service quality and destination image are recognized as being among the most important experiential dimensions for the construction of tourist perceptions and evaluations of a destination. These dimensions do not operate in isolation, but rather, they are connected to each other to produce an all-encompassing tourism experience which affects tourists' perceptions of quality and value of tourism products.

The framework also establishes tourist satisfaction as an intermediate variable between the experiential competitiveness and behavioural outcomes. The tourist satisfaction is reported as the matching or exceeding of the pre-visit expectations of tourists as per the Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT) (Shukla et al., 2024). Tourists form general impressions of the quality, authenticity and meaningfulness of their visit as they engage with a range of destination activities. These assessments then translate into their satisfaction and this satisfaction is the key factor in determining their future behavioural intentions.

The framework also takes into account Destination Image Theory (DIT) in which destination image is regarded as one of the factors that shape tourists' expectations and perceptions. Tourists perception and evaluation of experiential attributes is affected by destination image during the tourist's visit. Positive experiences strengthen positive destination images, and negative experiences can lead to decreased destination perceptions and in turn decrease satisfaction. Therefore, destination image is experiential and is one of the most important factors that contributes to the overall competitiveness of a destination.

Lastly, the framework reflects on intention as the final outcome of the experiential competitiveness. The intention to return to a destination is based on the tourists' previous experiences and satisfaction evaluations. For a strategic viewpoint, revisiting the intention is not only a behaviour, but also a measure of competitiveness of the destination, visitors' loyalty and sustainability of tourism. The integration of experiential dimensions and the generation of high degrees of tourist satisfaction are more likely to stimulate repeat visitation and competitive advantages in increasingly competitive tourism markets for heritage destinations that can achieve this.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Theoretical Contribution

This article makes a contribution to the tourism literature by taking the conversation on destination competitiveness beyond the conventional economic and arrival views. The variables involved in gastronomy experience, cultural heritage, service quality, destination image, tourist satisfaction, and revisit intention have been studied individually in the past. This article, however, combines these variables in the unified experiential competitiveness perspective. The study thus contributes to the understanding of the role of the multiple experiences generated in the destination in terms of behavioural loyalty in the context of heritage tourism.

Moreover, the article has theoretical contribution by incorporating two theories, namely Destination Image Theory (DIT) and Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT) to explain the relationship between experiential competitiveness and revisit intention. The proposed framework illustrates that destination competitiveness is not only dependent on the resources provided for the destination but also on how destination resources meet tourists' expectations and create positive experiential evaluations. This view sees tourist satisfaction as a key intervening variable that connects destination experiences to the longer-term outcomes of behaviour.

Strategic Contribution

Strategically, this article re-conceptualises revisit intention as a strategic measure of destination competitiveness in terms of the experiences the visitor has had, rather than just a behavioural outcome of tourism. In today's competitive post-pandemic tourism market, destinations need to not only draw tourists to their area, but maintain them by providing them with satisfying experiences and high quality. According to the study, the management of gastronomy experiences must be considered in conjunction with the other tourism attributes that make up cultural heritage, service quality and destination image. Experience integration is a key element that can be developed and studied as a key component of the tourism sector.

Moreover, the article adds to the current debate on tourism resilience and sustainability by highlighting the critical role of 'staying connected'. Repeat visitors help assure destination stability, eliminate constant visitor acquisition and enhance destination competitiveness over the long-term. The results herewith therefore reflect an orientation towards a tourism development paradigm which moves away from the concept of arrival and goes towards experience-centred destination management.

Managerial Contribution

The article offers practical tips for destination managers, tourism operators, and tourism policy-makers. The findings indicate that the stakeholders in tourism should be prioritizing the provision of integrated tourism packages that meet the tourists' expectations continually. The investment of the funds in the preservation of heritage or in the development of gastronomy, the improvement of services and the upfront of the destination should not be done in isolation, but coordinated in order to improve the quality of the experience.

The framework on the destination performance evaluation from the satisfaction based approach is a useful tool for destination management organisations (DMOs). Tourist satisfaction and revisit intention are good indicators of the competitiveness of a destination and can be used to assess the areas that need improvement. The emphasis on experience integration and satisfaction assurance by the tourism manager can enhance the satisfaction of tourists and strengthen the loyalty of tourists, thus the long-term sustainability of the Penang tourist destination will be improved.

CONCLUSION

The post-pandemic tourism environment has increased competition between destinations and changed the factors that affect tourism's success. While traditional indicators of competitiveness, like number of visitors and tourism receipts, still have their value, they are becoming less relevant in understanding long-term destination performance. Experiential competitiveness is a critical factor in the success of tourism destinations; because today's tourists want meaningful, authentic and satisfying experiences.

The gastronomy experience, cultural heritage, service quality, and destination image have been presented as critical dimensions of experiential competitiveness in heritage tourism destinations, as argued in this article. But the results show that these experiential dimensions affect the revisit intention mainly through tourist satisfaction. Satisfaction is identified as the key process whereby destination experiences are converted into behavioural loyalty as tourists assess their experiences as a whole.

The article, based on Destination Image Theory and Expectation Confirmation Theory, suggested an Experiential Destination Competitiveness Framework to propose how integrated destination experiences lead to revisit intention from the tourists' satisfaction. The framework emphasizes the strategic role of experience integration, expectation fulfillment and visitor satisfaction in order to reinforce the competitiveness of a destination.

The results highlight the importance of shifting the focus of tourism from attraction-based competition to tourism strategies based on experiences for places like Penang and other heritage tourism sites. Raising visitor satisfaction and improving retention, along with experiential quality, are essential to enhance the competitive edge of destinations and boost sustainable and resilient tourism development. Finally, experiential competitiveness is a useful lens to view the long-term success of heritage destinations in increasingly challenging tourism markets.

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Author Contributions

Ziffa Binti Zubir and Norazah Mohd Suki jointly contributed to the development of the conceptual framework, literature review, and manuscript preparation. All authors were involved in refining the arguments, reviewing the content, and approving the final version of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Materials supporting the review, including search protocols

and synthesis notes, are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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