

Pulled By Nature, Pushed by Reality: Navigating Destination Attractiveness and Intra-Destination Mobility in Langkawi

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the tourist retention dilemma on Langkawi Island, Malaysia, by assessing how digital communication and spatial logistics influence travel decisions. Using push-pull motivational theory and digital information processing paradigms, the study investigates the relationship between social media influence, destination attractiveness, and tourist decision making. Using a quantitative approach, survey data were collected from 120 domestic visitors who had previously visited Langkawi between October and December 2025. Data demonstrates that, while the island's natural scenery, ecological feature, and UNESCO Global Geopark status serve as powerful pull factors aligning with tourists' push motivations for mental well-being, physical attractiveness alone is insufficient to sustain tourist loyalty. The findings highlight a major gap between digitally managed expectations and on-site realities, which is worsened by structural challenges. Notably, overreliance on User-Generated Content (UGC) reduces pre-trip perceived risks but creates vulnerability when expectations are not met. Furthermore, tourist satisfaction is heavily compromised by intra-destination mobility constraints, a deficient public transport system, and localized inflation. As a result, practical infrastructure comfort, smooth accessibility, and perceived safety typically take precedence over intrinsic environmental appeal in the final decision-making process. The paper concludes that sustaining Langkawi's regional competitiveness requires strategic interventions from destination management organizations to promote authentic marketing, as well as considerable improvements to localized transportation networks.

Keywords: Destination Attractiveness, Intra-Destination Mobility, Social Media Influence, Push-Pull Motivations, Tourist Decision-making

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Introduction

Tourism has been one of the main economic contributors to Malaysia, and Langkawi has been positioned as one of the main tourism attractions in Malaysia. Despite being dubbed the "Jewel of Kedah" and being accredited as a UNESCO Global Geopark and its strategic positioning in the "Visit Malaysia Year 2026" campaign, Langkawi is facing an emerging crisis of tourist retention. The Langkawi Development Authority (LADA) projected a total of 2.81 million visitors in 2023; however, only 2.11 million visitors were reported by 2024. The present scenario calls for urgent strategic evaluation of what motivates the tourist's decision-making.

The digital age has transformed the tourist decision-making paradigm. Tourists are no longer merely receivers of what has been advertised. They are active organisers of their own travel itinerary, relying heavily on social media to minimize the perceived risks linked to intangible tourism-related products and services (Grewal et al., 2022; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). However, the dependence on social media has created an unexpected vulnerability, which is the gap between expectations and reality. For instance, when a destination is portrayed in a highly curated way or digitally edited in a way that it is not consistent with the actual experience, tourists'

dissatisfaction arises (Gössling & Stavrandi, 2021). In addition, the tourists' dissatisfaction from the marketing mismatch has been exacerbated by the localised inflation, particularly in accommodation and dining, which contrasts poorly with other regional travel destinations such as Phuket and Bali (Leong, 2023)

As a result, while Langkawi possesses intrinsic physical pull factors such as duty-free status and natural landscapes, the digital representations of these characteristics through social media influence have received little attention in the current literature. This paper attempts to bridge this gap by systematically studying how social media influence and destination attractiveness intersect to determine the current tourist decision making regarding Langkawi.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Push and pull factor

Decision-making by tourists is a multifaceted, complex cognitive process influenced by both internal and external factors. The underlying push-pull theory developed by Dann (1977) offers an effective framework for understanding these drives. Push factors are internal psychological motivations that drive a person to travel to fulfill personal needs such as leisure, relaxation, escape, or intellectual enrichment. People are intrinsically motivated to travel and keen to engage in any activities derived from those initial aspirations to travel (Dai et al., 2022; Wen et al., 2021). Also, push factors play an important role in travellers' decision-making and choice of destination (Ayoub & Mohamed, 2024; Li et al., 2022).

On the other hand, pull factors are the characteristics of a specific destination that draw tourists to the area. This includes both tangible infrastructures such as historical monuments and beaches and intangible features such as perceived safety and destination image (Ayoub & Mohamed, 2024; Wang et al., 2023). Furthermore, destination-specific perks such as shopping, food, entertainment, and essential amenities (Chang et al., 2023; Thio et al., 2022) significantly amplify tourists' intention to visit (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Ayoub & Mohamed, 2024). Langkawi Island's destination appeal is based on a multidimensional array of pull factors. Cultural and heritage tourism have been found to be important pull factors to Langkawi (Azemi et al. 2021). Additionally, the recognition as UNESCO Global Geopark has been identified as another important factors that attracts tourists to Langkawi (Shariff & Abidin, 2020)

Destination competitiveness in a competitive era

Destination selection is significantly influenced by the external appeal of the area, especially of the distinctive attractions available at that destination. They serve as the main motivator for tourists when comparing alternatives based on their personal preferences (Gordan et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2020). The final decision of destination choice is made based on a thorough evaluation of the specific destination's attractions and its perceived experiential value. Also, in order for a destination to become more competitive, it must be able to display distinctive traits such as unique cultural, physical, or natural attributes that set it apart from competitors that might not have that attraction. This serves as important determinant of a tourism destination's overall competitiveness and its capability to attract tourists' attention (Risfandini, 2022; Zabukovec Baruca & Čivre, 2022).

A destination's attractiveness is closely related to its tourism potential. High attractiveness not only increases popularity among tourists but also promotes that strategic enhancement of the destination's main attributes and operational performance (Mohamad et al., 2019). However, more recent studies highlighted that destination attractiveness is no longer static. It is highly influenced by the relationship between price-value and accessibility of the destination. According to Thio (2022) modern tourists carefully weigh the perceived experiential value against the difficulties in travel, ranging from the state of transportation to the accessibility of services. In the case of Langkawi, even though its natural beauty is undeniable, concerns about its declining tourism activities compared to other regional attractions indicate a vulnerability in its overall attractiveness (Paulino et al. 2020)

Social Media Influence as a Moderating Role

Social media has become an important instrument in the tourism industry, where it has been utilised by tourists to choose their travel destination. According to Xie et al. (2019), user-generated reviews and postings actively influence the final decision-making process in addition to establishing the destination image. The usage of digital platforms enables travellers to conduct comprehensive information gathering, translating intangible travel motivations to concrete decisions (Dogra et al. 2023). The social media mediation is not limited to pre-purchase behaviour but it precedes the entire travel lifecycle as travellers constantly use all the available information to create their own travel plan.

Building on this continuous information gathering, social media platforms have become a dynamic ecosystem in which potential tourists and previous visitors interact directly. The post-visit narratives uploaded to social media considerably shape the destination choices of potential travellers (Aljumah et al. 2022). Aside from that, potential tourists also depend on user-uploaded images and detailed feedback reviews as important determinants in minimising the perceived risks related to intangible tourism services (Matikiti-Manyevere & Kruger, 2019).

However, tourists' reliance on social media as their primary source of information has its own drawbacks. Due to their obvious authenticity, travellers are relying more on User-Generated Content (UGC) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, over the existing firm-generated marketing (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021; Wijaya et al., 2024). However, to over-reliance on influencer marketing may create problems, especially for the destination itself. While highly attractive visual content stimulates travel demand (Sari et al., 2023), over-exaggeration of a particular destination may produce unrealistic demand from visitors, which may lead to negative post-travel experiences, which in turn will produce unfavorable subsequent eWOM (Xie et al., 2019).

Destination attractiveness

Destination attractiveness is the perceived attractions that can deliver satisfaction and benefits to tourists (Kirilenko et al., 2019). Its intrinsic appeal is the fundamental concept in existing tourism literature. The attractiveness of a destination not only helps tourists to make informed choices but also acts as a crucial stimulant for broader tourism development (An et al., 2019). In addition, a destination's unique combination of easily accessible attractions serves as the primary pull factor, influencing tourists' choice of destination by aligning their diverse preferences (Xu et al., 2020). As a result, to capture a sizeable market share and gain a competitive advantage, destinations must actively develop while proactively develop distinctive characteristics that differentiate them from competing alternatives (Yuliarti, 2022)

Destinations are perceived as very attractive when their unique attributes perfectly align with tourists' expectations (Thio et al., 2022). A destination's attractiveness directly determines its potential to attract more tourists, therefore encouraging enhancements in destination performance and service quality. Consequently, according to Mohamad et al. (2019), a destination's attractiveness is a combination of natural resources, built amenities, and cultural heritage. Also, it is crucial to note that the attractiveness of a destination is very subjective. Each tourist evaluates a destination's experiential values and aesthetics based on their personal preferences (Pike et al., 2021). Eventually, this personal evaluation significantly influences the decision-making process. Destinations that portray a highly attractive image benefit from favourable perceptions among prospective travellers.

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of capturing the perceptual behaviours of visitors assessing Langkawi Island, this study utilised a quantitative research approach. To ensure that responses were based in actual experiences rather than speculative impressions that were made based on digital media, the target group consisted of domestic visitors who had previously visited Langkawi.

A total of 120 samples were gathered in the survey. Data collection was carried out between October and December 2025. The questionnaire is divided into four main sections: A – Demographic data; B – Social media influence; C – Destination attractiveness; D – Tourist decision-making. All the constructs were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree). Data from the survey were analysed using SPSS with a focus on descriptive analysis (frequency, mean, and standard deviation) to identify the baseline of perceptual patterns.

FINDINGS

Demographic profiles of respondents

The demographic distribution of the sample showed that 83.3% ($N=100$) of the respondents are female. The majority of the respondents (93.3%, $n = 112$) were between 20 and 25 years old, which shows that the respondents are primarily Generation Z and younger Millennials. In terms of ethnic distribution, the majority of the respondents are Malay (76.7%), followed by Chinese (10.8%) and Indian (4.2%). The results from the survey showed that leisure was the main travel motivation (65.2%), and most of them (65.8%) claimed that they travel at least once a year.

The impact of social media influence

Results of social media influence showed high dependency on digital content when planning a trip (refer to Table 1). The highest average score was documented for the usability of information for planning decisions ($M=4.37$, $SD=0.788$). The result implies that potential tourists not only use digital media for passive inspiration but also for active planning. They actively create their itineraries, analyse alternatives, and avoid potential travel risks based on this digital information. This result supports the findings by Matikiti-Manyeverere and Kruger (2019), who hypothesized that tourists rely heavily on social media for actual feedback and visual evidence of a destination, while actively using this feedback to create itineraries and reduce travel risk. Subsequently, technological dependency has evolved to the point that digital platforms act as a primary mechanism for avoiding travel risks. Potential travelers frequently use User-Generated Content (UGC) to reduce purchasing risks because they have more trust in actual travelers' feedback than destination promotional materials (Nguyen & Tong, 2022). Since perceived travels risks significantly and negatively impact a potential travellers' attitude toward a destination, high-quality information from social media is crucial in reducing these fears while fostering destination trust (Wang & Yan, 2022).

Respondents in this study showed a high level of trust in the information gathered from social media, where the source's clarity and organisation showed a high mean of 4.30 ($SD=0.693$). Furthermore, tourist-generated materials received a high mean ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.683$) for perceived relevancy. These findings reflect the results by Zhou et al. (2022), where contemporary travelers value information that is not only readily available but also perceived as precise, organised and directly related to their specific travel needs. In addition, respondents strongly agreed that reviews shared on social media offer sincere and honest reviews of their actual experiences ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.772$). Taken together, these results demonstrate the dominance of user-generated content (UGC) in contemporary tourism, where travellers are more likely to trust more on peer reviews that they perceived as honest and authentic rather than carefully chosen promotional materials.

It is important however, to note that although certain UGC is highly sought-after, the overall social media's trustworthiness yielded the lowest mean ($M = 4.10$) but the highest variation ($SD = 0.902$). Although the mean value difference is not substantial, this little variation indicates that travellers are becoming more digitally literate. This means that although they placed high dependency on peer recommendations in decision-making, they remain selective and wary of the platform that hosts all the information. This scepticism is coherent with previous studies showing that even though digital media users often rely on peer recommendations, these users often struggle to accurately judge the overall legitimacy of the unverified digital content, which leads to selective trust (Cheng et al., 2020). As a result, the empirical results from this study highlights that even though social media has been acknowledged as a vital information source, destination marketers must acknowledge the

importance of providing high-standard information quality since travellers are also looking for dependable and legitimate sources of information.

Table 1: Social Media Influence

Construct Item	Mean	SD
The information is useful for planning decisions.	4.37	0.788
The source communicates clear and well-structured information.	4.30	0.693
The tourist-generated content is relevant.	4.23	0.683
I believe the reviewers provide honest reviews of their experiences.	4.22	0.772
The source provides genuine content.	4.21	0.869
Online travel experiences or reviews on social media are accurate.	4.21	0.809
The tourist-generated content is reliable.	4.17	0.714
Social media platform for the review is trustworthy.	4.10	0.902

Evaluation of Destination Attractiveness

Empirical data showed that in terms of destination attractiveness, Langkawi Island's natural elements are the most compelling factor. The item "The natural scenery is lovely and appealing" showed the highest mean among all constructs ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 0.648$). This result is consistent with the current literature, which highlights that those unique natural elements act as key motivators for destination selection, especially in island and shoreline destinations.

However, the scores for the availability of fun and interesting places ($M = 4.42$) and proximity to amenities ($M = 4.43$) highlight an important theoretical fact. Tourists do not just evaluate beauty on its own. They also agreed that infrastructural convenience is an important part of the attractiveness composition. This finding is consistent with recent studies where it was indicated that contemporary destinations must strategise competitively by combining unspoiled natural attractions with easily accessible, high quality facilities and recreational activities. Being listed as a Geopark destination, Langkawi has a competitive advantage by combining its unique features with adjacent facilities and infrastructure (Zainuddin et al., 2018; Rahim et al., 2022).

Conversely, the item that scored the lowest mean is "the distance between attractions is close" ($M = 4.17$). Previous literatures have highlighted this issue by stating that the "intra-destination tourist mobility" (Ding et al., 2024) problem is somewhat related to the ease and patterns which tourists move between one place to the other. They emphasised that the mobility issues arise when tourism sites are widely spread but the transportation provided are ineffective, which in the end will severely damage the overall tourist experience (Han et al, 2018; Ding et al, 2024). Limited connectivity between sites limits the socioeconomic benefits of tourism because tourists will spend too much time just to travel between the attractions rather than interacting with the local attractions (Grinberger & Shoval, 2018).

Besides, a severe deficiency of public transport throughout Langkawi drastically worsens the issue of intra-destination mobility (Khadar et al., 2014). Tourists depend largely on private car rental and taxi services, with unregulated pricing structures, to move between dispersed attractions because of the lack of reliable public transportation. This dependence creates significant logistical and financial conflict, which in the end will impact overall tourists' satisfaction. As a result, while Langkawi successfully attracts tourists through their unique features, the dispersed nature of tourism attractions highlights the importance of strategic intervention to minimise the issues of inter-destination mobility in order to sustain tourists' loyalty (Masiero & Zoltan 2013).

Table 2: Destination attractiveness

Construct Item	Mean	SD
The natural scenery is beautiful and appealing.	4.52	0.648

Proximity to other amenities (restaurants, restrooms, and medical facilities) from the attraction influences my decision to travel.	4.43	0.730
There are plenty of fun and interesting places to visit in the destination.	4.42	0.643
The destination I visited is unique.	4.38	0.651
The condition of roads and transport infrastructure to the destination significantly influences my decision to visit.	4.33	0.737
The cultural heritage sites are attractive to me.	4.30	0.774
Cultural or heritage sites significantly affect my decision to visit a destination.	4.28	0.852
All information about that destination is complete and constantly updated.	4.26	0.825
The roads, signage, and paths are in good condition and easy to navigate.	4.25	0.759
The distance between attractions is close	4.17	0.792

Drivers of Tourist Decision Making

Results from data analysis showed that the dependent variable construct validates the theoretical integration of pull and push motivations in destination choice. In terms of push factors, the desire to improve mental and intellectual well-being showed the highest mean ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 0.686$) (Table 3). This statistical result is in line with the existing motivational framework that identified physical rejuvenation, relaxation, and escape from routine as the fundamental components of internal travel motivations. Tourists nowadays are increasingly choosing destinations that offer a therapeutic escape from daily life, as the need to support mental and physical well-being serves as a significant travel motivator (Lee & Idris, 2024).

More importantly, Langkawi's appealing natural environment scored a relatively high mean ($M = 4.8$), indicating that the primary psychological motivations work closely with the external pull factors. These findings support previous findings, which suggested that a pristine natural environment is one of the strongest pull factors for visitors' internal need for mental relaxation (Buckley, 2022). In addition, Qiu et al. (2021) suggested that engagement in an undisturbed natural environment can promote cognitive renewal, stress recovery, and general physical well-being. However, findings from the current study indicate that aesthetic and environmental attractiveness are insufficient to influence a final travel decision. This is because respondents were found to place a high importance on practical and infrastructural considerations, especially in terms of accessibility and safety ($M = 4.42$).

Regarding the above findings, Karl et al. (2020) emphasised that perceived security, safety, and physical accessibility serve as fundamental requirements rather than being merely supplemental benefits to the decision-making process. In addition, perceived threats about a destination's safety or extreme travel difficulties may completely discourage travel, regardless of how strongly a tourist is "pulled" by a pristine environment or "pushed" by the need for relaxation and wellness (Loi et al., 2024). Thus, the synthesis of findings from this study showed that Langkawi's competitive advantage depends not only on its ecological advantage and Geopark status to attract visitors. It must also be balanced with a highly secure environment as well as ensuring seamless accessibility to successfully initiate travel motivations among potential tourists.

Table 3

Construct Item	Mean	SD
I travel to improve my mental and intellectual well-being.	4.49	0.686
The destination has attractive natural scenery.	4.48	0.788
I travel to learn new things that will broaden my perspective.	4.43	0.695
Safety and accessibility are key considerations for me.	4.42	0.705
My health or physical ability influences activities I consider.	4.38	0.688
I travel to enhance my knowledge and experience of a different destination.	4.34	0.680
Travel motivations vary depending based on my age.	4.34	0.704

The destination attraction is easy to access.	4.33	0.760
I travel to escape from my life routine	4.33	0.843
The destination has good infrastructure, services and facilities.	4.29	0.783
I travel to take a break from everyday responsibility.	4.28	0.832
The destination offers a safe, clean and well-maintained environment.	4.26	0.716
I prefer destinations with strong cultural or heritage attractions.	4.23	0.775

CONCLUSION

In terms of theoretical implications, this paper contributes to the current tourism literature by connecting push and pull motivational theory with digital information processing paradigms. This paper emphasises that in today's digital economy, destination attractiveness is being digitally co-created. Rather than depending largely on intrinsic physical qualities, it is also reliant on electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and source credibility. This paper also provides a foundation for demonstrating expectation vs reality conflict in the context of island ecotourism.

Based on practical and societal implications, this paper highlights several recommendations for stakeholders, industry players, and hotel operators in Langkawi. Promotional efforts should shift away from overemphasised imagery and toward authentic images of the destination. Furthermore, genuine digital marketing must be accompanied by practical advancements and the promotion of authentic and realistic travel experiences. This reduces visitors' disappointment as they go through the actual visitation. Furthermore, maintaining Langkawi's competitive advantage over the neighbouring international islands necessitates addressing common travel issues such as lack of amenities, public transportation, and fluctuating travel costs, particularly during peak seasons. Finally, combining honest online marketing with a smooth, reasonably priced visitor experience can help Langkawi to foster a consistent demand for tourism, resulting in a steady flow of employment and improved quality of life for the local communities.

This paper explored the challenges of retaining tourists to Langkawi Island. This study investigated the connection between social media influence, push and pull motivations, and destination appeal. Even though the island's Geopark status has successfully become one of the pull factors, empirical data show that visual appeal alone is insufficient in a market where demand is heavily reliant on digital platforms. To create travel itineraries and minimise travel risks, tourists often rely on User-Generated Content (UGC). This, however, creates the gap between expectation and reality, particularly when the actual visitation experience differs from those portrayed online. Infrastructure deficits, unregulated pricing, and limited intra-destination mobility all have negative impacts on visitors' experiences. The paper concludes that sustaining Langkawi's competitiveness requires a two-faceted strategic intervention. First, the mobility, accessibility, and perceived infrastructural convenience are so important that they may outweigh the integral travel motivation. Secondly, the Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) must use promotional techniques that reflect the authentic destination, rather than overemphasising aesthetic promotional materials. Nurturing this link between digital marketing and efficient physical accessibility is essential for fostering tourist loyalty and sustaining regional economic growth.

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