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Tourism Destination Competitiveness Ranking and Tourism Performance — Comparison Between High-Income Versus Low-Income Countries

Abstract

This research note compares the impacts of the macroeconomic condition on the relationship between tourism destination competitiveness (TDC) ranking and tourism performance. This study utilized the cross-country analysis of the World Economic Forum (WEF) Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI) data among 115 countries. Macroeconomic conditions are conceptualized in high-income versus low-income nations, while the WEF TTCI ranking explains the TDC ranking. The Partial-least square-structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) Multi-Group Analysis (MGA) results showed that TTCI ranking significantly influenced the low-income group's tourism performance only but not for the developed ones. The results confirm the criticism of the TTCI ranking bias, reflecting the unbalanced competitiveness assessment distribution between advanced and low-income countries. The study findings augment the incomparability among countries on different levels of development and the arbitrary weighting of the TTCI ranking report, which may lead to inaccurate perceptions of the country and incorrect investment decisions.

Keywords: tourism destination competitiveness, tourism performance, macroeconomic conditions, high-income versus low-income countries

1. Introduction

Many debates have been over the causal relationship between economic development and tourism growth, explicitly considering the relationships between macroeconomic conditions, destination competitiveness and performance (Jayathilake, 2013; Massidda & Mattana, 2013; Tugcu, 2014). Past researchers propose that the macroeconomic conditions reflect the attractiveness and competitiveness of tourism destinations. Furthermore, they highlighted the possibility that the macroeconomic conditions of a destination could affect tourism performance, at least indirectly (Croes & Rivera, 2010; Gavurova, Belas et al., 2021; Kimunio et al., 2023). Similarly, as numerous researchers stipulated, economic development level influences the relationship between hosts and visitors and, consequently, the tourism industry's performance (Cárdenas-García et al., 2015). However, most acknowledge the complex and multifaceted relationship between economic development, macroeconomic conditions, and tourism performance.

Macroeconomic conditions are dynamic factors that influence destination competitiveness and can affect tourism industry competitiveness in many ways (Hashim et al., 2019; Ioannides & Debbage, 2014). A stable macroeconomic environment is essential for the success of businesses (Boden Jr & Nucci, 2000) and, therefore, necessary to establish the competitiveness of a destination (Porter & Ketels, 2003). Although

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macroeconomic stability alone does not directly contribute to a destination's competitiveness, the instability can severely negatively impact tourism destination competitiveness (TDC). Considerably, when comparing developed countries with less-developed countries, environmental, economic, and social factors can have different impacts, affecting the demand for tourism in different ways (Azzopardi & Nash, 2013; Gomezelj & Mihalic, 2008).

The most comprehensive standard illustrating the macroeconomic condition of a nation is the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or Gross National Income (GNI) (Balaguer & Cantavella-Jordá, 2002; Chen & Chiou-Wei, 2009). GDP and GNI provide a comprehensive overview of the economic activity within a country. They capture the total market value of all goods and services produced by individuals, businesses, and the government during a specific period. Both measures provide a comprehensive standard for evaluating economic performance and have been considered a crucial objective of modern economic development (Lee & Chang, 2008). These measures consider various sectors, such as agriculture, manufacturing, services, and government expenditure, providing a holistic assessment of a nation's economic output (Bazargani & Kiliç, 2021; Gavurova, Privara et al., 2021; Tugcu, 2014).

The relationship between tourism and GDP growth, and consequently, a country's GNI status, has been a subject of significant study within the scientific community. Numerous research efforts have underscored the substantial influence of tourism on a nation's economic prosperity. Tourism's contribution to GDP is multifaceted, encompassing expenditures on accommodation, transportation, food services, entertainment, and other related sectors. Studies, such as those conducted by Antonakakis et al. (2015), Chou (2013) and Gao et al. (2021), have consistently demonstrated a positive correlation between tourism development and GDP growth, especially in countries where tourism is a prominent industry. However, the extent of this impact can vary depending on several factors, including the country's level of economic development, tourism infrastructure, and policies in place (Gao et al., 2021; Pata, 2021).

While tourism can significantly boost the GDP of lower-income countries by providing a source of foreign exchange and employment opportunities, it can also contribute to the diversification of income sources in higher-income nations. Additionally, the sustainability of tourism growth and its long-term effects on income inequality remain subjects of ongoing investigation within the scientific community. Notably, most of these studies have one similar proposition: the complex relationship between tourism and a country's income status (Aliyev & Ahmadova (2020). As such, recent research has begun exploring the inter-relationships between a destination's macroeconomic situation, competitiveness, and performance (Jayathilake, 2013; Hanafiah et al., 2016; Massidda & Mattana, 2013). These studies have implied that countries' development status differences affect the relationship between hosts and visitors and, consequently, the tourism industry's performance (Cárdenas-García et al., 2015).

Countries at different stages of development may have varying capacities to attract and accommodate tourists, which can influence their tourism performance. In addition, factors such as infrastructure development, resource availability, and institutional frameworks can differ significantly between developed and developing countries, shaping the experiences and satisfaction of tourists. Based on global practices, countries can be differentiated based on the type of economy (Hanafiah et al., 2015; Mazanec et al., 2007). According to the World Bank, the classification of countries into high-income and low-income categories is based on GNI per capita (World Bank, 2020). The World Bank currently classifies countries with a gross national income (GNI) per capita of USD12,536 or more as high-income economies. On the other hand, while the specific range may vary, the World Bank classifies upper-middle-income economies as those with a GNI per capita between approximately USD 4,046 and USD 12,535. Lastly, the World Bank generally ranks lower-income economies with a GNI per capita below USD 4,045.

Macroeconomic conditions, particularly a country's GNI, can significantly impact the stability of its economy. A strong and stable economy provides a favourable tourism development and growth environment. Therefore, countries with higher income levels are expected to experience a stronger positive relationship between TTCI and tourism performance, as the stable macroeconomic conditions facilitate increased investment, consumer spending, and overall economic activity in the tourism sector. However, it is essential to note that the Srhoj et al. (2022) study reveals that the positive impact of public grants on tourism firms' outcomes is most pronounced in regions with high tourism demand. Their study acknowledges the significance of income factors in shaping tourism outcomes. In cases where a country prioritises tourism and possesses the financial means to support private tourism firms, mainly through service upgrades, the potential for additional positive effects exists, provided that a strong foundation of established tourism demand is in place.

To date, limited studies are attempting to look at the effect of macroeconomic conditions of a destination on the Tourism Destination Competitiveness (TDC) and their actual tourism performance (Bazargani & Kiliç, 2021; Gavurova, Privara et al., 2021; Mior Shariffuddin et al., 2023). On the other hand, the identification of TDC ranking has not been empirically examined to any great extent. Furthermore, it was found that the causal effect of the TDC ranking on tourism performance was debatable. Only a few tourism researchers have evaluated how macroeconomic conditions affect a tourism destination's performance, even though several options exist for categorising a destination according to its macroeconomic conditions (Cárdenas-García et al., 2015; Webster & Ivanov, 2014).

It is essential to mention that the tourism industry has been used globally as a strategic sector, promoting the economic well-being of nations. However, the travel and tourism industry is susceptible to many internal and external financial and non-economic forces, resulting in negative tourist perceptions, indirectly affecting TDC (González-Rodríguez et al., 2023; Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019; Pforr & Hosie, 2009). This recognition emphasises the importance of considering macroeconomic conditions 'effect', which may interact with the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI) in influencing tourism performance. Furthermore, the unique interplay between tourism performance, macroeconomic conditions, and the TTCI is likely to be intricate and mutually influential, with macroeconomic conditions moderating the relationship between the TTCI and tourism performance. As such, this study examines the statistical validity and evaluates the relationship between TTCI, macroeconomic conditions and tourism performance, considering the existing disparity or gap.

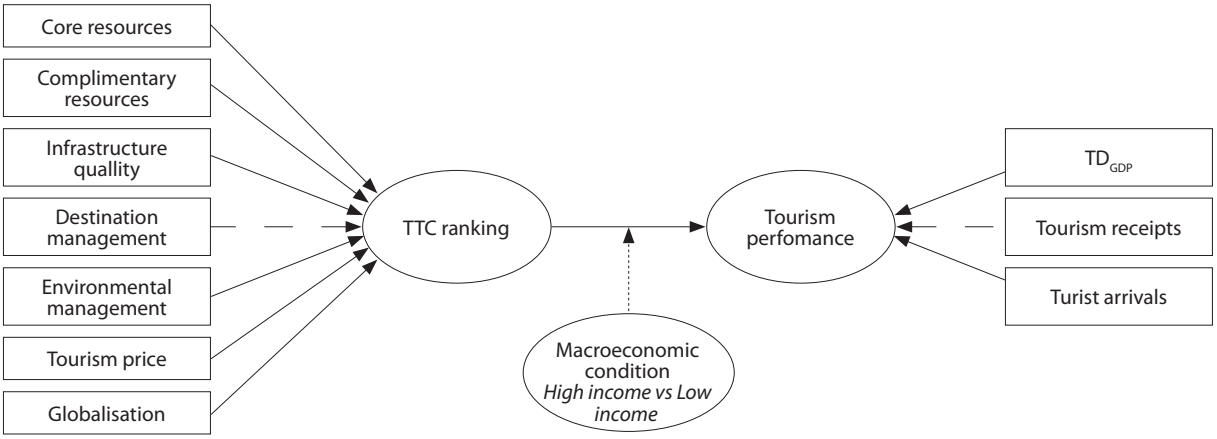
2. Method

This study employs a structural model to examine the relationship between the TDC ranking and the interplay of macroeconomic conditions on tourism performance. The conceptual model proposed by Dwyer and Kim (2003) was adopted. The TDC constructs are represented by the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI) ranking (which includes the destination's core resources, complimentary conditions, infrastructure quality, destination management, environmental management, tourism price and globalisation) (Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019). The following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: *The effect of TDC ranking on tourism performance is significantly different for high-income than low-income nations.*

H0: *The effect of TDC ranking on tourism performance is similar for high-income and low-income nations.*

Figure 1
A research framework



The research framework (Fig.1) combines the constructs of TTCI ranking, macroeconomic condition, and tourism performance. Based on the literature review, there are seven critical determinants of TDC ranking: core resources, complimentary conditions, infrastructure quality, destination management, environmental management, tourism price and globalization. Meanwhile, the dependent variable (economic prosperity) in Dwyer and Kim's (2003) model was substituted with tourism performance (tourism's contribution to GDP, international arrivals, and tourism receipts) (Croes & Kubickova, 2013). As for the moderating variables, the GNI rate was used (Mazanec et al., 2007).

Secondary data was collected concerning each identified variable in the proposed theoretical framework. The variables were selected based on a few fundamental principles, including their relevance, analytical soundness and accessibility of data (Hanafiah, 2020; Nardo et al., 2005). In particular, data published in the World Economic Forum's Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (2015) report represented most of the TTCI ranking, GNI and tourism performance variables. After the final data assessment and considering missing data, this study used 115 countries as a research sample for further analysis. To test the study hypothesis, the Partial-least Square-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) - Multi-Group Analysis (MGA) was opted for (see Afthanorhan, 2014).

The PLS-MGA was adopted to investigate the impact of moderators on the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. There were two reasons for selecting the PLS-MGA approach over the interaction approach. First, MGA is common in CB-SEM methods; accordingly, the results obtained in this research using PLS will be helpful for future researchers who might wish to re-examine and compare the moderating effects using CB-SEM methods. Second, the moderator examined in this study was discrete/categorical. The PLS-MGA examines moderators by dividing data samples into subsamples (mostly dichotomous, e.g. high and low) according to the moderating variable, where the same PLS model is run for both subsamples (Chin, 1998). The differences between the two groups are then compared by examining the significance of the parametric t-test (Henseler, 2012).

3. Findings

The measurement model assessment reported that the convergent validity, construct reliability and discriminant reliability threshold loaded significantly (Hanafiah, 2020). Next, the structural model assessment (R2, Q2 and f 2) is within acceptable scope (Hair et al., 2017). Following the MGA approach, the sample was first split into groups (subsamples), and the path relationships of exogenous/ independent variable(s) were

regressed with endogenous/ dependent variable(s) using one subsample at the time. This allowed each model to be deemed acceptable (or unacceptable) concerning the measurement model.

Next, the bootstrap method was applied (500 times) to re-sample the data to obtain the standard error of the structural paths in the subsamples under consideration. Subsequently, differences between the path estimators were tested for the significance of the hypothesized path. As mentioned, the specific moderating effect under consideration was the macroeconomic condition. Since the moderating variable was categorical, the overall sample was split into high-income and low-income groups. Low-income countries have less than USD12,536 per capita GNI per year, while high-income countries have over USD12,536 per year per capita GNI (Essue et al., 2017). Specifically, 75 countries (65 per cent) were identified as high-income nations, while 40 countries (35 per cent) were grouped as low-income nations. Table 1 shows the estimated values of the structural relations for the two subsamples.

Table 1
PLS-MGA analysis

Path	β_L *Low income*	t-Values	p-Values	β_H *High income*	t-Values	p-Values
TTCI +EC -> TP	0.240	2.260	0.024**	-0.036	0.043	0.966

Note. TP = Tourism performance, TTCI = TTCI ranking, EC = Economic conditions.
**p<.05. ***p<.001.

The PLS-MGA results revealed that the high-income group in the study produced slightly different results from the high-income group. Even though the Smith-Satterthwait test of differences revealed no significant paths of differences (Henseler, 2012), the MGA results showed that TTCI ranking significantly affected tourism performance in the low-income group (β_L=0.240***; t=2.260). This finding suggests that a higher level of competitiveness in less developed economies, as measured by the TTCI, can positively impact their tourism industry.

The findings showed that the impact of the TTCI ranking on tourism performance differed between the high-income and low-income groups. In the high-income group, the relationship between TTCI ranking and tourism performance did not reach statistical significance, suggesting that other factors may play a more prominent role in shaping tourism outcomes in these destinations. This outcome challenges the notion that the TTCI ranking uniformly influences tourism performance across all income groups. These results provide valuable insights into the nuanced relationship between TTCI ranking and tourism performance across different income groups. It highlights the importance of considering destinations' varying contexts and characteristics when examining the influence of competitiveness on tourism outcomes. The findings suggest that while the TTCI ranking may not significantly affect tourism performance in high-income destinations, it can substantially improve performance in low-income destinations.

4. Implication and conclusion

The study's findings reveal that a destination's economic status significantly moderates the relationship between TTCI rankings and actual tourism performance, whether it falls into high-income or low-income countries. While most extant studies examining the effects of TDC on performance are done so at a micro (e.g., specific destination) level, this study examined the impact from a macro (e.g., cross-country) perspective to understand the issue of TDC in a global context. This study proved that high-end countries are more efficient in transforming comparative into competitive advantages (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Notably, being favorably in the TTCI ranking for low-income countries can enhance their visibility and appeal as tourist destinations. It can also contribute to their ability to compete effectively with other destinations, attract tourists, and generate economic benefits through tourism.

In essence, this study highlights that the macroeconomic conditions of a destination can shape the trajectory of high-end and low-end destinations differently in achieving superior or inferior tourism performance outcomes. The study also underscores how a favorable macroeconomic climate, characterized by robust GNI levels and economic stability, can act as a catalyst for low-end destinations, propelling them towards achieving superior tourism performance. This supports the idea that destinations facing adverse macroeconomic conditions can benefit from the tourism industry, indirectly leading to desirable tourism outcomes. Furthermore, within the low-income group, the study emphasizes the significant impact of TTCI rankings on tourism performance. A favorable ranking can enhance a destination's attractiveness, attract investments, facilitate marketing efforts, stimulate policy reforms, and foster collaboration. Acknowledging the influence of TTCI rankings enables low-income countries to strategically position themselves in the global tourism market, potentially leading to sustainable tourism development and economic growth.

However, the study also raises significant concerns. It highlights the challenges associated with comparing countries at different levels of development and questions the arbitrary weighting of the TTCI ranking report. Comparing countries with diverse socio-economic, cultural, and environmental contexts solely based on standardized indicators and weights can oversimplify the complexities of their tourism sectors, potentially leading to inaccurate comparisons and misrepresentation of competitiveness. Besides, the study draws attention to the arbitrary assignment of weights to different indicators in the TTCI ranking, which may not accurately reflect their true importance in influencing tourism performance. This can result in distorted perceptions of a country's competitiveness and misguided investment decisions.

To address the limitations of this study, future research should adopt a longitudinal approach to capture the dynamic nature of macroeconomic conditions and their impact on the relationship between TDC and tourism performance. A more nuanced categorization of macroeconomic conditions beyond high-income versus low-income countries is also warranted, considering factors like inflation rates, exchange rates, and unemployment levels. Besides, future research should examine the relative importance of different TDC dimensions under varying economic conditions. More empirical studies are needed to explore how attributes such as core tourism resources, destination management, and pricing influence competitiveness in different settings. Additionally, researchers should consider the effect of tourism components on economic growth, delving into how tourism demand and supply interact with competitive advantage factors. Lastly, incorporating additional indicators or alternative competitiveness indices alongside the TTCI ranking can provide a more comprehensive assessment of TDC and its connection with macroeconomic conditions, shedding further light on the competitiveness of tourism destinations.

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