



Human agency shaping tourism competitiveness and quality of life in developing economies



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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the nature of the relationship between tourism competitiveness and quality of life with human agency as an intervening variable. The study argues that integrating human agency as a foundational construct within the tourism competitiveness framework will enhance the theoretical knowledge of tourism competitiveness. A panel data analysis was applied to the case of Central America to examine the relationship between tourism competitiveness (TC) and quality of life (QoL). The results reveal a bi-directional causal relationship between the two constructs, as well as human agency acting as a moderator between TC and QoL, indicating a negative impact on such relationship. Such findings provide a number of theoretical and managerial implications, thus reinforcing the central role of human agency in defining the nature of the relationship between TC and QoL.

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1. Introduction

In the academic literature, tourism competitiveness has been predominantly considered from an instrumental perspective and destination is considered competitive only when it can convert a number of relevant factors into tourism revenues (Li, Song, Cao, & Wu, 2013). However, this instrumental perspective could lead to perverse identities and actions. One could think of a destination to be able to maximize revenues while not being able to transpose those revenues to enhance the citizens' quality of life.

This study eschews the assumption that the maximization of destination revenues implies contiguous benefit to destination residents. In reality, tourism expansion could overtake other economic sectors (e.g., textile, agriculture), thereby reducing jobs in those sectors and affecting individuals and families (Dwyer, Forsyth, & Spur, 2004). Similarly, Webster and Ivanov (2014) pointed out that “competitive destinations fail to fully transform their competitiveness potential into economic benefits for their local populations” (p. 139). This means that what should matter the most is for the individuals to gain access and use resources (inputs), and consequently these resources either constrain or enhance the individuals' quality of life (Sen, 1999). Resources refer to weather and natural attributes, culture and heritage, infrastructure, the quality of the hospitality industry (facilities, amenities, and attractions), and human capital. Value refers to the appeal and ability of a

destination's human resources to attract demand with memorable offerings. The value generated by these offerings is the result of the nature and quality of human agency. The process that moves resources into memorable offerings should ultimately enhance the quality of life of the destination's residents. For this reason, tourism competitiveness is being defined as a set of resources that can provide memorable experiences thereby prompting increased tourism demand and enhancing quality of life (Andereck, Valentine, Vogt, & Knopf, 2007; Deller, Tsai, & Marcouiller, 2001; Rogerson, 1999).

Past research has focused on assessing the performance potential of destinations. This potential references inputs (mainly attributes) that may realize tourism development. However, potential does not necessarily make destinations more attractive, prompting increased demand and enhanced quality of life. Mediating factors such as inequality, market imperfections, and institutional weakness may affect the ability of destinations to better tourism development. That is why this study is premised on a performance approach. Performance is linked to output and output measured through demand (memorable experiences) and quality of life can provide timely information pertaining to how the tourism industry is performing. Memorable experiences are grounded by the existence of the number of tourism firms at a destination that perform strongly in international tourism (export). However, tourism can reveal diminishing income (Adamou & Clerides, 2009), thereby hurting residents. Therefore, two conditions should be present for competitiveness to take place, i.e., increased tourism receipts and enhanced quality of life.

Understanding the correlation between tourism competitiveness and quality of life is not obvious due to the dissent between conceptual

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and empirical models such as the Conceptual Tourism Competitiveness Model as developed by [Crouch and Ritchie \(1999\)](#); the Destination Competitiveness model developed by [Dwyer and Kim \(2003\)](#); the Tourism Competitiveness Monitor, developed by [Gooroochurn and Sugiyarto \(2005\)](#); and the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) developed by World Economic Forum (WEF). [Crouch and Ritchie \(1999\)](#) stressed the difficulties in measuring and understanding quality of life of residents and how such ability might not inspire confidence in the impact that is directly attributable to tourism. Quality of life is a multidimensional paradigm with numerous interpretations that could be either subjective or objective in nature. From a subjective point of view, quality of life is influenced by the requirements and expectations by the individual in terms of happiness, well-being, or satisfaction with life ([Diener, 1984](#); [Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999](#)). The objective nature of quality of life, on the other hand, reflects the factual circumstances in a given cultural or geographic unit. For the most part, most quality of life indicators are manifested by social indicators such as incomes ([Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009](#)). However, this study contends that there are other indicators that are able to seize important aspects of society that are not sufficiently reflected in purely economic and social yardsticks.

The current study suggests that more income does not necessarily result in better quality of life, because of desires, necessities, and individual choices ([Croes & Rivera, 2015](#)). This resonates with [Sen \(1999\)](#) who claimed that quality of life does not only include income or resources, but also non-material conditions, such as health, environment, and security. While increased revenues via tourism competitiveness could filter down and translate to increased income for residents, there is no assurance that such increases would also improve residents' quality of life ([Sen, 1999](#)). If quality of life is interpreted as the opportunity of individuals to act on behalf of the goals that matter to them, then such agency reflects the core ingredient for social change.

The human agency construct has been extensively analyzed in the literature through a number of psychological, sociological, economic and political development frameworks. For example, Bandura's self-efficacy viewed the individual context as contingent in shaping actions, while Giddens' structure agency perspective considered context as a required condition for individual action. The psychological perspective of [Bandura \(1986\)](#) and the sociological approach of [Giddens \(1984\)](#) neglected to consider freedom as the source of human agency. This study builds upon Sen's conceptualization of human agency, which clearly differentiates between what a person does because of what s/he values as opposed to what a person undertakes due to coercion, seduction, or subjugation. This freedom to choose is what matters to a person and is a crucial departure from previous conceptualizations of human agency, such as Bandura's self-efficacy approach and Giddens' structure-agency perspective. According to [Sen \(1999\)](#), human agency is "someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives" (p.19). Sen's conceptualization also is more relevant in the context of developing countries. In other words, Sen's conceptualization enables the analysis of human agency, especially in the context of developing countries, to be assessed in a more sensitive and policy relevant manner.

Human agency may be enhanced or constrained by personal motivation, social pressures, public action, and policy and is viewed as the link between behavior, environment and outcomes ([Alkire, 2005](#)). It assumes individual autonomy and free will as well as the intention to make things happen according to one's own values and objectives. In this sense, development is rather seen as a capability (opportunity) of an individual to convert resources into achievements (functionings) which are influenced by an individual's potential to make choices, to take actions, and to seize opportunities ([Sen, 1999](#)). This ability is affected by objective elements such as quality of education, life expectancy, crime, poverty, employment, and subjective elements such as memory, ethics, common sense, and judgment. Therefore, human agency is affected by personal and existing social arrangements.

Human agency has not received adequate attention in the tourism literature. A search through EBSCOhost using the keyword 'human agency' in the abstract from 2005 till the present revealed only seven works that included human agency as a concept in tourism literature. For example, [Chaperon and Bramwell \(2010\)](#) investigated human agency through the dependency lens in the context of Malta and Gozo. The study focused on residents rather than tourists. Others have applied human agency to study crises in Thailand ([Cohen & Neal, 2010](#)), destination path dependency and its impact on the economic landscape ([Ren, 2011](#); [Gill & Williams, 2014](#); [Sanz-Ibanez & Claire, 2014](#)). These studies either look at agency from a company perspective rather than from the individual ([Cohen & Neal, 2010](#); [Sanz-Ibáñez & Clavé, 2014](#)); or, human agency is assessed within a relational network ([Ren, 2011](#); [Arai, 2006](#)), or is considered from a self-efficacy perspective ([Blocker & Barrios, 2015](#)). However, all these studies have not included the individual freedom as an integral component of human agency following Sen. Freedom is at the heart of Sen's human agency concept, and it is this definition that this study has followed.

The multi-dimensional nature of quality of life is that an individual has the freedom to choose the life s/he values and to which s/he aspires. Freedom from Sen's perspective means that a person should have the ability to be able to achieve a goal as well as the freedom to actually desire what he wants to achieve. Freely to make decisions and to feel empowered to change is thus a crucial component of the human agency construct and is viewed by [Sen \(1985, 1999\)](#) as the primary end and principal means for development. More specifically, the ability of a person to freely choose the life s/he values depends mainly on three conditions: (1) a range of choices, (2) the freedom to choose, according to his life aspirations and values, and (3) the resources to realize those aspirations ([Sen, 1987, 1999](#)).

This perspective, which reveals the pivotal role that human agency may play in the conversion process to transform inputs (resources) into outputs, may provide a deeper understanding and more insights of why destinations differ in their level of competitiveness. Interactions among individuals and the context of these interactions may promote or mitigate trust, innovation, productivity, higher wages, and rewarding careers to the detriment of competitiveness, and consequently affecting quality of life ([Blake, Sinclair, & Soria, 2006](#); [Peypoch, 2007](#)). Conversely, competitive destinations cannot be promoted, supported or sustained by discontented people. The willingness to interact or the quality of interactions between local residents and tourists according to the residents' everyday life could charge powerful and intangible attributes of the destination and its people to tourists, ultimately characterizing a destination's competitiveness level. However, this dynamic relationship between competitiveness, quality of life and human agency is an under researched area in the tourism literature.

Therefore, the main objective of the study is to investigate whether human agency is an intervening factor in the context of tourism competitiveness as it could impact or be impacted by quality of life. The question posed is: does human agency change the nature of a relationship between tourism competitiveness and quality of life, or does it explain the relationship. This study postulates that the concept of human agency may enhance our understanding as to the nature of the relationship between tourism competitiveness and quality of life and may be a potential explanation of why cross-country differences exist in tourism competitiveness, enhancing the theoretical knowledge of tourism competitiveness.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section provides the literature overview on tourism competitiveness, quality of life, and human agency. The third section discusses the data description and the operationalization of the model, while section four reviews the case study. The fifth section reviews the methodology utilized in this study and provides the study results. The final section summarizes the findings and provides suggestions for future studies.

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